

Why some business leaders oppose empowering workers, and why they should do it anyway

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Credit: Christina@wocintechchat.com

The pandemic has led to a sharp increase in the number of people working remotely and an increase in competition for skilled labor. It would seem like a golden opportunity for business leaders to empower their workforce in order to keep good employees and recruit new ones.

But the idea has met with widespread resistance. What gives?

Who better to ask than Brad Kirkman? With Payal Sharma from the University of Nevada Las Vegas and Lauren D'Innocenzo of Drexel University, Kirkman co-authored a recent article in Sloan Management Review titled "Why Leaders Resist Empowering Virtual Teams." Kirkman is the General (Ret.) H. Hugh Shelton Distinguished Professor of Leadership in NC State's Poole College of Management. We recently had the chance to talk with Kirkman about empowering employees, leadership and the bottom line on the bottom line.

The Abstract: Your paper argues that now is the time for business [leaders](#) to focus on empowering workers. What do you mean by "empowering workers," and why is it important now?

Brad Kirkman: A lot of people assume that empowering employees means simply giving them more power, which translates into more autonomy and decision-making discretion in their jobs. But that's an overly narrow view of [empowerment](#).

Empowering employees actually does include increasing employee autonomy, that's true. But it is also three other things: Increasing the meaning employees find in their work; making sure employees see the impact of what they do on others; and building up the sense of competence employees have that they can do their jobs well. After all, giving someone more autonomy over a job they find meaningless, that has no impact, and that they don't feel that can do well is not really empowerment! So companies need to make sure they enhance all four dimensions of empowerment.

The reason empowerment is so important right now is based on multiple factors.

For one, the business environment today is characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (the acronym "VUCA" is often used as shorthand for this). It is virtually impossible for leaders to have all the answers. And it is virtually impossible for leaders to understand the intricacies and nuances of every job their employees do. As a result, it is basically a business imperative that leaders empower their employees so that the dynamic nature of work today can be accomplished effectively.

By empowering workers, employers can increase employee productivity, satisfaction, and retention.

Another reason empowerment is important right now is that people are increasingly motivated by things other than money. In fact, a 2018 study found that nine out of 10 employees they surveyed would take a pay cut to do more meaningful work. In fact, when asked how much they would actually give up, they reported that they would be willing to let go of 23% of their entire future lifetime earnings for greater meaning. That is why empowering employees is so critical today. People are more motivated by meaning in today's world than they are by money.

And these trends have only accelerated with the COVID-19 pandemic. McKinsey found that two-thirds of U.S.-based employees reported the pandemic has caused them to reflect on their purpose in life. Almost half said they are reconsidering the kind of work they do. Importantly, the millennial generation was also three times more likely than other generations to report reconsidering their careers.

In short, people are really searching for meaning and purpose in the jobs they do. By empowering them, employers can tap into these motivational sources and increase employee productivity, satisfaction, and retention.

TA: Is it possible to benefit from empowering workers in every field?

Kirkman: Not really. Research has shown that strategies like empowerment or self-management only really pay off when the work employees are doing is complex. In other words, there has to be enough "room" for the employees to exercise their empowerment or else they view it as a waste of time. Clearly, empowering someone to do a relatively simple, routine job doesn't really do anything for their motivation. The job is already controlling what they do anyway, so there is no room for empowerment to flourish. In the end, empowerment is a much broader and deeper form of intrinsic motivation compared to these other practices.

TA: Now that working remotely is more common, are managers more supportive of empowering workers?

Kirkman: With the pandemic greatly increasing remote working, you would think so. After all, remote work clearly means that leaders cannot monitor or observe what their employees are doing day-to-day. Almost by default, that would mean leaders would need to empower employees to take on more responsibility and authority when managing their far-flung workforce. Makes sense, right?

What's more, because remote workers need to take on more autonomy outside the office and because employees are looking for more meaning in their work, now would be the perfect time for leaders to double down on empowerment.

However, our interviews with and research on both leaders and employees shows that many leaders are actually resisting empowering their remote employees. It's almost like if they cannot constantly monitor their employees in the office, they struggle with letting go and empowering them to get their jobs done in remote settings.

TA: Why are some business leaders opposed to empowering workers?

Kirkman: We have identified at least three reasons why this is the case.

First, research has shown that leaders are motivated to lead in three ways: Affective motivation (they like doing it); social-normative motivation (they feel a sense of duty or responsibility to lead); and noncalculative motivation (they see the benefits of leading others and don't fixate on the costs of doing so).

If leaders are not motivated on one or more of these dimensions, they typically won't make the effort to empower others. For example, if leaders don't like to lead, they certainly won't take the time or invest the energy to empower their employees, because empowerment is time-consuming, especially on the front end. Similarly, if they don't feel a sense of duty to lead, they won't buy into empowerment. And, if they are constantly focused on the costs of empowering others, they won't do it.

These issues are exacerbated in remote working environments because typical problems like poor communication with employees can further dampen a leader's affective motivation to lead. Some leaders also feel less accountable and visible to their organizations in remote environments, and so they feel less duty-bound or obligated to empower others. And, the amount of juggling that leaders are having to do today, many working from home or only part of the time in the office, means that they have less time to develop empowering routines and practices.

Some leaders think power is a zero-sum game. It's not.

Second, some leaders believe that empowering others means giving up some of their own power and control. However, I and others have shown that this is just not the case. Some leaders think power is a zero-sum game or a fixed pie. It's not. What is actually true is that when a leader uses an empowering style with their employees, the leader actually becomes more powerful—because they can then focus on the things that

leaders at their level should be focused on: big-picture, more strategic, long-term pursuits. Meanwhile, empowered employees are developing their own leadership skills, thereby keeping the company's leadership pipeline full.

But it is often hard to get leaders to see these advantages because they are afraid to put themselves out there and empower others. The pandemic has caused many people to feel a loss of control over their lives generally, and this certainly includes leaders working in remote environments. This has caused some leaders to compensate by "clamping down" and closely monitoring their employees so at least they feel like they're controlling something.

Finally, many leaders view managerial practices like empowerment as risky. That is, leaders may view empowerment as more time-consuming because they may have to hand-hold employees when the employees are learning to take on new tasks—or leaders might believe that if their employees make a mistake during the empowerment process, that mistake might be held against them. With the pandemic, many leaders have reported increasing feelings of isolation and exhaustion because their work "bleeds over" into their personal and family time. To avoid even more fatigue, some leaders believe that they'll save time and energy by avoiding having to correct any employee mistakes. Of course, this is only a short-term fix, because the risks of not empowering remote employees is actually greater as the complexity of work demands that leaders empower others for overall company success.

TA: What can be done to shift executives who have dug in on this issue—and why would you want to change their minds?

Kirkman: As noted, there are a lot of different reasons why leaders resist empowering their employees, especially those that work remotely. There are several steps organizations can take to combat managerial

reluctance to empower.

First, from a motivation perspective, companies should try to help their leaders "reframe" their motives.

For example, for affective motivation, increasing the richness of the communication leaders have with followers can be motivating. By richness, I mean not using email as the primary mode of communication, because you lose the nonverbal cues, the tone of voice, the facial expressions that are so important when communicating and building relationships. We have found that having a "camera-on" policy during remote meetings can recreate that sense of being together and increase leaders' affective motivation to lead. For social-normative motivation, companies can help leaders with prioritization of tasks, as again they are juggling so many competing responsibilities. This should lead to a greater shared sense of responsibility for a team's accomplishments and performance. And, to make sure leaders don't fixate on the costs of empowering their remote employees, compared to the benefits, companies can use a "buddy system" so that leaders assign tasks to pairs of employees, which should reduce the perceived costs that come with empowerment.

Companies can also reduce fears of losing power or control by directly intervening to boost leaders' sense of control. For example, they can make sure that leaders and their [teams](#) have the digital tools and training they need to interact and work together effectively in a remote setting. Increasing the frequency of online meetings—within reason!—can also help because employees can report on their progress and any issues they are having in a timely fashion. This should help ward off the "out of sight, out of mind" phenomenon that can increase fears about losing control.

Finally, companies need to make empowerment feel less risky.

For example, companies can insist that leaders take time off to recharge their batteries so that they are in a better head space to empower others. Another strategy that works well is "no-meeting Fridays," which are increasingly used by companies to create space for exploratory, non-urgent projects that can feed longer-term development. And companies should also promote "bonding time" between leaders and employees, not just as a nice-to-have but as a must-have. Remote working does produce more disconnectedness and loneliness for both leaders and their employees. The deeper the relationships between leaders and employees, the less likely leaders will be to view empowering employees as a risky endeavor. That is, [trust](#) built through relationships will be the glue that holds an empowerment process together.

TA: As someone with relevant expertise, what do you think the short-term and long-term ramifications would be if a given company takes steps to empower its workers?

Kirkman: The bottom line is that empowerment improves the bottom line. All of the evidence we have on empowerment and empowering leadership demonstrates positive effects for leaders and employees, the teams in which they work, and their organizations as a whole. That's something everyone should be excited about.

Short-term, there are costs to empowering others, as leaders need to set up effective empowering systems and structures. It's not as easy as just saying, "Okay, you all are empowered, good luck." But the short-term costs come with dramatic long-term benefits. Empowering others is the right thing to do, both from an increased meaningfulness standpoint and from a profitability standpoint.

A great example of a company that has been using empowered leadership effectively for a number of years is W.L. Gore Associates, which makes Gore-Tex and several other products. Gore has over

11,000-employees (called associates), but it has a strict rule that there be no more than 150 people in each office. When a new project or situation arises in the company, rather than having a formal leader assigned to it, a person with the most knowledge on the issue is empowered and assumes leadership. The company does employ a team of higher-level leaders who are responsible for the company's overall well-being (who they refer to as mentors), but they still have no formal authority when it comes to projects. Empowering leadership at Gore relies heavily on direct lines of communication, which can lead to much faster responses during times of great change or crisis.

More information: "Why Leaders Resist Empowering Virtual Teams" is available at [sloanreview.mit.edu/article/wh... ering-virtual-teams/](https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/why-leaders-resist-empowering-virtual-teams/)

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