Leading the Way to Empowerment

*Enlightened leaders and empowered employees cooperate for competitive advantage*

The concept of employee empowerment is not always easy to grasp, and even those with an intuitive understanding of the principles can find implementation challenging. The Council for Continuous Improvement (CCI), based in San Jose, California, not only offers hands-on training in empowerment concepts, tools and techniques, CCI provides regular opportunities for sharing experiences in this largely unmapped territory.

At recent CCI general sessions, Council members have heard reports on empowerment efforts at Motorola, Lockheed Austin, Kaiser Electronics, General Electric, and many other companies large and small. Topics of discussion range from the broad overview of the CEO’s perspective to the nuts-and-bolts mechanics of facilitating teams without adequate resources. In the following paragraphs, we will review some of these findings.

**Why Bother?**

Employee empowerment is difficult because it represents a fundamental change in the way work gets done. It is easy to avoid this challenge by resorting to the tired bromide, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” However, even management systems that aren’t broken can learn to work better.

CCI members and guests continually testify to the valuable ideas for process improvement that are unleashed by empowerment efforts. Employees with a stake in the process have an internalized incentive to improve performance.

One company focused on two layers of the organization with a program of town meetings, process mapping, and identifying best practices. Management chose processes that needed study and chose team members based on their expertise relative to the process. Teams spent two and a half days in professionally facilitated meetings off-site to develop their action plan. Management evaluated the plans on the spot and decided whether or not to fund them. For approved plans, team members took ongoing responsibility for implementation. In one instance, management accepted a team’s recommendation (against their own instincts) and they were rewarded by a 50% reduction in defects within three months.

**Leaders not Parking Meters**

As impressive as the results are, teams are only part of the process. Most quality veterans stress the importance of a guiding vision from the top of the organization. At Kaiser Electronics in San Jose, Allen Gates is a pioneer in corporate culture change. At CCI’s quarterly CEO Forum, Mr. Gates addressed the CEO’s role in continuous improvement. He pointed out that continuous improvement means continuous change, and this requires action-oriented leadership and teamwork.

Mr. Gates discussed Kaiser’s use of the *DVFR* change model as a tool for planning and managing cultural change. This model states that resistance to change ($R$) can be
overcome by an appropriate combination of dissatisfaction with the status quo \( (D) \), a vision of a preferred future \( (V) \), and the first steps of a plan for achieving that future \( (F) \).

“Leaders build visions and get people enrolled in those visions; they empower people, and they manage learning,” Mr. Gates said. “By empowerment, I mean that people not only believe they have the authority and the mandate to work within the system to do whatever needs to be done — but they also have the mandate and the authority to challenge the system.”

Leaders must provide the commonality and constancy of purpose that bonds the organization as well as the teams. Team members must be willing to place team goals ahead of individual goals and learn to resolve conflict and act in concert.

**Time to Facilitate**

To prevent teams from degenerating into boring committees with hidden agendas where nothing gets done, facilitators must provide training in meeting skills and help elicit maximum participation from team members. In the beginning, the facilitator is an important resource for learning conflict resolution, brainstorming, and other valuable techniques.

Kaiser also initiates teams at professionally facilitated meetings held off site. In addition to providing a distraction-free environment, this helps teams establish distinct identities and demonstrates management’s commitment to the process. In the beginning, most companies bring in outside consultants to facilitate teams, but they immediately begin training their own personnel as facilitators. Kaiser, for instance, has several staff members who volunteer as facilitators, and Motorola employs three full-time facilitators.

Within the Council for Continuous Improvement, there is a special interest group (SIG) dedicated to the needs and interests of facilitators. A recent SIG meeting was devoted to what CCI SIG Manager Ann Yonemura called “kamikaze facilitating” — taking on a risky mission without adequate resources. Recalling her own experiences as a facilitator, Ms. Yonemura noted, “I would barter and negotiate for resources. People volunteered their own time. And we were creative, customizing and scaling down training as necessary.”

Ted Trevino, a part-time facilitator at Motorola in Austin, described his kamikaze challenge: turning an 18 person staff meeting into a task team. Mr. Trevino began as the team leader, but he soon assumed the facilitator role from the team sponsor (who was also their manager). The team’s size made it difficult to maintain focus and achieve consensus, but Mr. Trevino noted significant changes in individual behavior as the team pursued its mission. “We progressed from a personal interest motive into a group success incentive.”

**Obstacles to Empowerment**

Not everyone shares in the group success incentive, however. Like the supervisor who saw the light at the end of the empowerment tunnel and thought it was a train headed straight at him, many managers worry that ideas like empowerment lead directly to practices like self-managed work teams. Most, however, come to realize that empowerment really provides an opportunity to discuss business issues with employees.
Work rules and union fears can sometimes impede team formation or function, but other companies are finding unions to be powerful allies in bringing empowered teams to the workplace. One consultant noted that unions can help convince people that it’s not just a show. In the past, productivity meant losing jobs, but some unions have begun to understand that increased productivity can add jobs in the long run.

Lockheed Austin Division had the foresight to engage in a direct dialogue with their union in 1990. They negotiated a letter of agreement with Lodge 2720 of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers that led to the formation of “the joint committee” composed of three union representatives and three management representatives. Over the next two years, the joint committee oversaw the introduction of team-based total quality management at Lockheed Austin, and now everyone has reason to celebrate.

**Winning Hearts and Minds**

Members of the joint committee participated in a panel discussion at a recent CCI General Session. Keith Dickinson, president of the union local, paid homage to John Sherwood’s notion that the key to high performance and commitment is to regard everyone in the workplace as a resourceful and creative partner in the business. It is precisely this respect that is at the core of empowerment. With this simple tool, Lockheed Austin has turned potentially adversarial relationships into creative think tanks. “When we opened the plant,” recalled Tony Iacono, Lockheed labor relations manager, “we took the initiative to make a friendly work environment, so perhaps that’s why a ‘traditional’ adversarial relationship never developed.”

The team approach promotes ownership of process. This brings productivity gains, because workers can perform more effectively when they have the whole picture of what their work means. At Lockheed Austin that translated into a 20% reduction in cycle time for two consecutive years, among other improvements. Their union realizes that process improvement is not achieved at the workers’ expense. “We’re not trying to negotiate the contract through employee involvement,” Mr. Dickinson remarked. “But we all realize that it’s easier to do something right the first time than to fix something that’s broken.”

At CCI General Sessions, the panelists and presenters described above were available to answer extended questions and share their experiences in depth. Expanded versions of these empowerment experiences were published in the *Proceedings of the General Sessions* of the Council for Continuous Improvement, which are distributed to Council members following each session. For further information on the General Sessions, *Proceedings*, CCI team training materials, and other membership benefits of the Council for Continuous Improvement, call CCI in San Jose CA at 408-283-1300.