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Common Sense: The Key To An Empowered Workplace

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Entrepreneurs

I write about my journey as a first-time CEO and startup founder.

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Hot trends in corporate culture and management technique evolve from decade to decade, often in alignment with prevailing social trends.

Recently, the "empowered workplace" has become popular, especially among tech-oriented companies.

In empowered workplaces, many of the rigid rules of conduct such as fixed work hours, locations, and job responsibilities are loosened to create a more flexible and creative environment.

Such workplaces adopt the philosophy that how the work is done is less important than the quality and creativity of the work produced. At BodeTree, I've subscribed to a variation of this approach for a while now. Our team members have historically been encouraged to become cross-functional, independent, and empowered to take decisive action.

Additionally, we have a relatively laid-back environment. Employees who need to work from home, for example, almost always are allowed to do so,

provided they ask first. The same applies for work hours. If someone needs or wants to come in earlier or later than our standard hours, we're almost always able to accommodate their needs.

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However, I've learned that empowerment isn't without its pitfalls. Empowerment is a two-way street. The cost of providing the creature comforts of flexible work hours, locations, and responsibilities are intended to be offset by increased productivity and creativity.

In giving up the structure that was created to ensure that employees stay focused and on task, leaders of empowered organizations must trust that their employees are putting forth exceptional effort.

Common sense, on the part of both the employer and employee, is central to successful empowerment. When one side of the table fails to hold up his or her end of the bargain, problems can arise.

Personal responsibility and self-awareness are key

Empowerment is all about balance. The harder you work and more productive you are, the more flexibility you're able to enjoy. The problem is that we, as humans, have a tendency to flip the script.

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It's human nature to try and secure as much personal benefit as possible while giving as little as you can in return. Managers and employees must

both fight against this base desire. That, of course, requires more than a little self-awareness.

I've experienced my fair share of frustration with a lack of self-awareness in the workplace. Over the years, people have absolutely abused some of the luxuries we offer, such as the ability to work remotely and have flexible schedules.

I don't think that the people on my team who have struggled with this are conscious of their decisions. Instead, they just demonstrate a lack of common sense that allows them to rationalize their actions.

Yes, this is a Millennial problem

When such lapses of common sense require me to confront people and clarify expectations, I'm often met with a response of "well, you didn't say that I couldn't do that." In other words, I'm told that it's essentially my fault for not being clear enough regarding the parameters of what constitutes acceptable behavior.

It's a perplexing and incredibly bold response, especially considering young employee's general disdain for traditional structure. When I encounter this contradictory lack of common sense, my retort is always the same. If you don't want to be micromanaged, then don't act like you need micromanaging.

Millennials (and yes, I qualify as one) seem to exhibit a sense of entitlement often transcends logic. It's as though our generation has our default settings calibrated to act first and ask forgiveness rather than permission. Unfortunately, that philosophy is opposed to the core tenants of the empowered workplace.

Surround yourself with good people

At the end of the day, I firmly believe that employee empowerment is a good thing. However, it requires leaders and employees alike to demonstrate common sense and intellectual honesty. When common sense is abandoned in favor of entitlement, the entire structure collapses.

How then, can a leader manage to find the right balance? How does one empower employees and ensure that they don't abuse the system? First, leaders must over-communicate. I preach this lesson frequently but often fail to live up to my advice. Leaders must be clear and unafraid to reinforce messages time and time again.

Second, they must hold people accountable. This can be difficult, for sure. However, organizations cannot survive without a culture of accountability. It is up to leadership to be mindful, fair, and decisive in their actions when holding people accountable for their decisions.

Finally, I encourage leaders to heed the words of my mentor, Matt Ankrum. Matt frequently reminds me that "the best managers surround themselves with people they don't have to manage." At some point, the ability to thrive in an empowered workplace is a genetic trait. Some people can handle it, and others can't. The job of any leader to try and identify the right people early on. It isn't easy, but no one ever said leadership would be a walk in the park.

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