

The Garden of Empowerment

A great myth in the American workplace is that a manager can empower an employee to succeed.

It just isn't so.

Empowerment means taking action and facing risk in order to get what you want. It's the way to ensure that you achieve the result you want.

Nobody but you can take action and face risk to get what you want.

Nobody but you can decide whether the risks are worth the potential pay-off. Nobody but you can decide if your environment is a safe place to take those risks.

There is only one person who can empower an employee, and that's the employee.

So how can you, as a manager, do that for somebody else?

You can't.

There is only one person who can empower an employee, and that's the employee. There is only one kind of empowerment, and that's self-empowerment.

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Empowered employees take risks. They:

- **R**ealize that their results are the consequences of their own choices.
- **I**f it is to be, it's up to me. This is their mantra.
- **S**tep out of their comfort zones.
- **K**eeP focused.

You can't have empowerment without personal responsibility and personal accountability. Empowerment involves a mindset of ownership and personal responsibility for one's actions. It involves a mindset that something needs to be different and a determination to do whatever it takes in order to make it different. People empower themselves, take actions, accept the risk, make change happen—and then answer for the result.

In other words, empowered people:

1. Take responsibility for the success or failure of their choices, behaviors, and actions—*before* they know how it all turns out. They own all of it, even if they're working for somebody else or as part of a team.
2. Empower *themselves* to succeed. They take the actions and the risks that they need to in order to achieve the results they desire.
3. Are accountable for those actions. They show that they are willing to answer for the outcomes that result from their choices, behaviors, and actions.

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In the Garden of Empowerment, empowered employees are called *weeds*.

Weeds are low-maintenance employees. Managers don't have to tend to them or water them or tell them how to get from one side of a cement sidewalk to the other—they just figure it out. These weed-employees perform well even if their busy managers ignore them. If you give them a clear, end-point description, you can count on them to meet your expectations. It's as if they can read your mind, and you love having them around.

The 85 Percent Solution

Weed-employees believe that at least 85 percent of their success on any given day or any given project depends on themselves and on nothing else—not how much it rains or whether the landscaper is coming that day with a vat of weed killer to clean up the garden. They don't complain that their teammates aren't pulling their weight or that they get stuck with all the boring jobs. Still, they're not so naive as to believe there are no barriers to their success; indeed, weeds will ask you where the weed killer is so they can make a plan for getting out of its way. They don't blame the weed killer for their setbacks.

Most managers are lucky enough to have at least a couple of weeds on staff. But most also have to deal with the weed's polar opposite: orchid-employees.

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weed's polar opposite: *orchid*-employees, who blame failure, mistakes, and missed opportunities on everyone but themselves. Orchids believe that they are responsible for very little of their own success. To them, factors beyond their control—like a coworker's actions, a supervisor's attitude, a lack of resources, or simple bad luck—determine how the project will turn out.

While the weed is an “85–15,” the orchid might be a “50–50.” Half of their success is up to them, and half, they believe, isn't. Daisies fall in between: Daisy-employees believe that they determine 70 percent to 80 percent of their success, but that outside factors are responsible for up to 30 percent of it.

Which are you?

Your response to the following question will reveal a lot about you: *How much of your success is up to you, and how much of it is determined by outside conditions, like the environment, other people, or just plain bad luck?*

Forty percent you, 60 percent environment? Half and half? One hundred percent you, forget the outside world?

What your answer reveals is how successful a person you are.

- If you answered 85 percent (or higher) *you*, 15 percent (or less) *outside conditions*, that says you believe that you see yourself as mostly responsible for your own

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success. (Congratulations, you're a weed!) And you're probably a successful person.

- On the other hand, if you answered 50–50 or anywhere less than 85–15, be honest: Are you as successful as you would like to be? Or do other people, situations, and influences seem to always stand in the way of your getting ahead?

A Daily Decision

Suppose you manage two employees who work at exactly the same job. As Employee A walks out of his house in the morning, he believes that 60 percent of the success of the day's work belongs to him, and 40 percent depends on outside conditions: the boss's mood; how often the telephone rings; whether he gets a flat tire on the way to work; how well he slept the night before.

His coworker, Employee B, on the other hand, is more optimistic about her chances for success. She's pretty sure that 85 percent of her success depends on her, and just 15 percent will be motivated by outside sources.

It should come as no surprise that, when quitting time rolls around, Employee B has had a more productive and happier day than Employee A. Maybe Employee B ignored the boss's bad mood, or figured out a way to cheer him up and engage him in the task at hand. Perhaps she chose not to answer the telephone for two hours so she could work without interruptions and finish her project quicker. And

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because she slept poorly the night before, she compensated by taking a brisk walk at lunchtime instead of sitting in the too warm cafeteria, becoming over-relaxed, and eating the comfort foods that she knows can make her sleepy. When she noticed that one of her car's tires looked low on air that morning, she swung by the service station and had them take a look—and sure enough, the mechanic found a slow leak and changed the tire. She took charge of her situation, her day, her progress, and her success. She decided before she left the house in the morning that she was responsible—at least 85 percent of the way—for the success of her own day.

In short, she decided before she left the house that she would have a successful day, and so she had one.

She's a weed.

That kind of attitude is available to everyone. Employees who believe that they are at least 85 percent responsible for their success—and that just 15 percent of the success of a project or a day depends on the way the wind blows—will get the results they're looking for.

The most unstoppable weeds believe that 100 percent of their success is up to them and zero is influenced by outside conditions.

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An employee's mindset determines how much responsibility she will take for her success. And for better or worse, she decides that *before* she begins her work. *She* determines her level of achievement in advance.

Nobody—even the best manager—can make that decision for an employee. You can't force an employee to take responsibility for how a job turns out. You can't force your employees to empower themselves to make sure their work turns out well.

If you try, you could find yourself too embroiled in work you should be delegating—and trusting employees to do.

To orchids, that's just fine. If you do more, they can do less.

Manage-Level Versus Coach-Level

Orchid-employees need extra care and attention: special food, moist soil, lots of humidity (extra supervision, more hand-holding, frequent discipline). Orchids suck the resources right out of you. They are high-maintenance.

Orchid-employees are “manage-level” people.

It's appropriate for brand-new employees to be orchids; with some time and coaching, they turn into daisies with the potential to become weeds. But some orchid-employees never blossom into daisies. They have

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been on the job for a long time and still need to touch base with the supervisor every day, don't work independently, whine about the work, and steal time from managers and coworkers because they need so much help and attention to do their jobs.

These bad orchids drain the organization's resources and, sadly, need to be dug up and transplanted in jobs that suit them better—sometimes in other organizations.

Orchids do not empower themselves to succeed at work.

Orchids do not empower themselves to succeed at work. Perhaps they don't want to work very hard. But more likely:

1. They're unclear about what is expected of them.
2. They are unable to gain the authority they need to carry out their projects.
3. They are frozen with fear because their boss constantly criticizes their work.

In response, they fall short on the job.

It is very expensive to run an organization if you have to tell your employees what to do, then check on them to see that they did it, or hire people to check on them. It's far better to set clear expectations and practice a little bit of patience so your employees can ask all of their questions and know for sure what is expected of them. Then the boss

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can let them get to work, knowing that all parties are on the same page.

Setting clear expectations for employees helps them maximize their ownership of the project at hand. It makes it easier for them to empower themselves to take the actions—including taking risks and making tough decisions—that are necessary in order to get the job done according to their understanding of your expectations.

In fact, managers cannot be too clear when it comes to letting employees know what they expect from them. Making yourself perfectly clear takes five steps:

1. Tell the employee exactly what you want. Do not expect anyone to read your mind!
2. Ask the employee to explain your expectations in his or her own words. Some will balk at this, saying it's unnecessary, but insist on it.
3. Ask if the employee agrees to do what you have asked, according to the expectations you've explained.
4. Explain what the consequence will be if the employee fails to fulfill the agreement.
5. Enforce that consequence if the employee doesn't hold up the agreement.

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With weeds, you probably can skip Steps 2 through 5. With most orchids, though, you'll need to follow the process strictly.

Although you cannot empower your employees, you can create an environment that encourages them to empower themselves. Setting clear expectations is a key to creating that environment.

Planting daisy-employees in an environment of empowerment works especially well. Daisies are “coach-level” workers; that is, they have the potential to grow and produce like weeds, but they need a little push now and then. Some daisies are drought-resistant: They just need watering now and then. That sort of employee might need coaching once a month for an hour for three months before transforming into a high-performing weed. Another daisy might need extra shade plus lots of water—the equivalent of coaching twice a month for six months. More delicate daisies might need water, shade for part of the day, and sun in the afternoons; they are barely more independent than orchids. Those equivalent employees might need lots of attention from supervisors for extended times or they won't survive, and in fact, they might never “bloom” into weeds.

So you can see that it's not practical to devote the same amount of time to every employee, and in fact, it's not even fair.

Creating an environment of empowerment means giving people what they need to thrive. A weed is no better than

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an orchid; it's just different. It has different needs. If you treat a weed like an orchid, you'll kill it, and vice versa. Managers need to determine what each employee needs to grow and perform well, and supply that.

Micromanagers who believe in treating everyone the same for equity's sake will never grow their organization into an environment of empowerment.

The truth is: No manager has time to devote an equal amount of attention to every employee. Supervisors need to focus on coaching the ones with the potential to grow into weeds.

Still, orchids need more coaching and supervision than weeds, so bosses wind up spending more time with the orchids. That's appropriate. The key is to focus on the employee's needs and to be patient enough to devote the time it requires to get that employee to the point at which he or she no longer requires so much of the boss's time.

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Managers can more effectively parcel out their time to employees if they classify them as needy orchids, high-potential daisies, or independent weeds. Knowing what kind of employee you're dealing with can direct you to allocate the appropriate amount of time and involvement to each one.

*“Weeds are not supposed to grow,
But by degrees
Some achieve a flower, although
No one sees.”*

—British poet Philip Larkin