



## Transformational Leadership & Service Podcast

### Episode 7 Transcript

#### *emPOWERment*

In the early 1980's, the question was regularly asked, "If Japan can, why can't we?" Due to economic necessity, American business began to seriously consider the question. The brightest minds in the western world began aggressively studying the Japanese business models in an attempt to "learn from" ("copy") their enviable success. It soon became evident that it wasn't just statistical process controls and just-in-time inventory on which the balance of economic power rested. Japanese employees were rightfully identified as the "secret weapon" to business success. Scores of Japanese employees were encouraged to take ownership of their jobs and act accordingly. Employees at every level within organizations were busy making and implementing truly substantive decisions. Decisions which could either make or break the company. Decisions which could serve to either dazzle or drive away customers. It was obvious. Empowered employees were making a difference. Well, almost three decades have since passed and many well-meaning organizations still struggle with the issue of "empowerment" and what it really means.

To fully understand empowerment, one must first understand the root word from which the term is drawn. Power. With practicality in mind, I choose to define power this way. **Power: the ability to grant, withhold or withdraw something someone wants or needs.**

The implications of this definition are fairly obvious. I possess the unquestioned power if someone must approach me to approve, validate or sign off on something they want or need to do their job. Of course, by virtue of my power, I have the ability to *grant* their request if I wish. However, occasions may arise in which I am either unable or unwilling to grant the request. In such situations, I may opt to *withhold* that which they are requesting. Seldom will I say "no" outright. More often I will respond with a slightly more hopeful, "not at this time...", "Maybe later...", or "We'll just have to wait and see." Of course, the most obvious manifestation of power occurs when the person in power opts to *withdraw*, or take away, something someone already has. The impact of such actions is immediate and unmistakable. The long term consequences can be devastating.

Now for my definition of empowerment. **Empowerment: is to willingly and knowingly grant official power to others.** Simple? Yes. Easy? Certainly not.

At the heart of any successful attempt to empower is trust. Before any of us can feel free to share power with another, we must trust that the other person's level of

commitment is consistent with ours. We must trust that the other person is adequately educated, trained and skilled to make and implement quality decisions. We must trust that the other person's objectives are in line with those of the organization. If these levels of trust have been established, empowerment can become a reality. However, if such trust is not apparent, unfortunately true empowerment usually becomes something we talk about, but never really experience.

So, how do we get there from here? Enlightened leaders look for opportunities to prepare those around them, through education, training and skill-building for the challenges ahead. Enlightened leaders are anxious to share their vested power with individuals who are mentally and emotionally ready for the challenge. Enlightened leaders loudly and proudly declare the confidence they have in their trusted and empowered followers.