

CREATING^{an} empowering environment

by Gary Mayes

Empowering and releasing people to make their unique contribution requires both individual attention and a supportive corporate climate. For most people this kind of environment is something never experienced yet always longed for. At the same time, most leaders crave for a way to increase the horsepower of their organization, but building this kind of environment will require developing new skills and new priorities for their time and energy.

I have identified **six requirements** for what it takes to effectively empower and release people. There is a certain sequence to these, yet more significantly they need to all be cultivated together. These six requirements may prove to be the most strategic set of considerations a senior leader or leadership team can devote themselves to.

RESPONSIBILITY

People need to know specifically what they are responsible for. Behavioral expectations, desired outcomes, much of what we typically think of as the important parts of a job description is included in this first requirement. Yet, beyond what is written on a page, everyone of us wants to know that we have a strategic assignment so important that if we miss it then the whole team—the whole mission—will suffer. To use a sports analogy, people need to know what their “blocking assignment” is *and* that if they miss their block, the quarterback is going down.

Some corollary components of this requirement: Helping people discover God’s unique calling and shaping on their life; mobilizing people according to their calling and passion versus recruiting them to an ‘open slot;’ developing and communicating effective job descriptions.

Without a clear sense of responsibility:

- *People struggle with role confusion: whose responsible for what, what do people expect me to be doing... it can lead to creative paralysis, or differing assumptions which form the basis for miscommunication.*

- *There is a nagging fear of “doing it” wrong, or not giving my energy to what really matters. We want to give ourselves to a task that is demanding and significant.*
- *People cannot minister out of freedom, there are no boundaries on the playground.*
- *Senior leaders end up micro-managing people because those who are serving don’t know enough about what they need to be doing to think ahead nor solve their own problems.*

RESOURCES

If people are going to be able to carry out the responsibilities they have been given, they must be provided the resources they need to do so. Unfortunately, it is common for those with defined responsibility to be operating “short-handed” in terms of materials, finances, and equipment.

However, in addition to these obvious needs, the requirement of resourcing people goes much further. Other significant resourcing needs include: the training needed to develop genuine proficiency, targeted assistance in regards to problem solving, mentoring devoted to skill and leadership development, adequate access to new ideas, and information about the bigger picture of the organization so that leaders have the ability to make effective decisions; (*ie. financial status, major projects, goals, new personnel, etc.*)

Without adequate resourcing:

- *There is a nagging sense of disempowerment that grows in people when they don’t have the tools, resources to truly succeed. All of us want to make a real impact, but can’t do it for long without resources.*
- *People feel set up for failure.*
- *The feeling of “being over my head” may stimulate energy to learn and grow for a while, but over time it erodes confidence in our ability to do a job well.*

RELATIONSHIPS

All of us want to know that we are part of a team, that we are working alongside a group of people who share the load and who are committed to our well being as much as they are committed to the task at hand, that we have people who are “watching my back.” Granted, people are wired differently and some need more relational support than others, but no one wants to be sent out to play a position and then ignored.

Meeting this relational need means creating time for encouragement, time for shared learning and growth. Ministry is about the work that we do **and** about the people we do it with. Carl George's concept of the Huddle for the community of leaders who make things happen is exactly on point. Unfortunately most senior leaders worry more about the production of their people than about the people who produce.

Without adequate relationships:

- *Left alone we lose perspective... especially in the midst of demanding responsibility.*
- *Mentoring becomes formal, often wooden, rather than natural and simple.*
- *People can be destabilized or demoralized by problems.*
- *People focus on the task alone and miss God's unique and ongoing work in them as they serve.*
- *People reproduce the task-driven approach to the work at hand among those they lead rather than truly developing the people they lead.*

REVIEW

One way to honor the work people do is to review it's quality and quantity. By never reviewing it, we dishonor the sacrifice they have made. How can you know how to resource someone without knowing how things are going? How can you provide problem-solving support without knowing what the problems are? If the mission of your organization matters, then the contribution of your leaders and the work they do to carry out that mission matters, too.

Unfortunately, many people have experienced periodic assessment as a club being held over their heads. Instead, it should be a regular two-way dialogue, and opportunity to advance the cause and to support your people, a chance to capture learnings as they occur. Regular review is a far cry from controlling accountability, rather, done well it should accelerate individual and corporate capacity.

Without effective review:

- *People can feel undervalued. After all, they have given so much of themselves, often sacrificially, and it feels no one is paying attention.*
- *Problems that arise become forest fires before they are dealt with. And forest fires take a huge toll, not only on what they burn, but on the people it takes to put them out.*
- *People have trouble keeping the dots connected: ie. Remind me again how the thing I am doing makes a difference?*

RISK

The freedom to risk is directly correlated with the freedom to innovate. All innovation, all creativity, all new ideas are inherently risky. In fact, in a world that is changing so rapidly, even doing what has been tried and true in the past can be risky. There are no guarantees of success. Therefore, it is critical to build a culture where there is the freedom to fail. When someone truly has the freedom to fail without undue fear of personal repercussion then they have the freedom to risk.

We say more about what is acceptable by who we choose to honor than almost any other behavior, therefore, there is probably a need to honor people who failed in spite of the quantity or quality of their efforts. This is profoundly different than honoring people who failed out of laziness or carelessness.

It is important to note that creating an environment that nurtures risk will challenge the ability of leadership to release control. It will challenge the willingness of leaders to trust other people. And it will surface the character based issues of reputation and ambition: What will others think of me if our organization stumbles? What if we release people to try new things and they succeed better than I would have? What if someone else's new idea diverts attention and resources from my agendas?

Without a culture of risk:

- *There is a lack of freedom to innovate or pioneer what's new.*
- *People live in fear of judgment, failure, or disapproval rather than in the confidence of support and encouragement.*
- *The size of an organization's collective comfort zone actually decreases... we move further and further away from the edge.*
- *Potential leaders are not discovered or appreciated... leadership cannot be developed without the freedom to lead.*
- *There is a steady loss of leaders. Leaders want a place to serve that will allow them to lead, an opportunity to enlarge the tent, a place where they are trusted to use their gifts. Over time, organizational "leadership" positions are filled by those committed to the status quo.*

A REASON

Listed last for emphasis, this may be the most important of all. People need to know there is something worthwhile at stake and that their effort is directly connected to it. Every organization, business, or enterprise of any sort is actually populated by people who volunteer. Even when there is a paycheck involved, employees volunteer themselves to the challenges of the task at hand every day.

But as people get involved in the demands of their responsibilities they lose sight of the reason behind what they are doing. It is nothing devious, it is just human nature. Vision has a half-life of seven days. That is to say, no matter how clear and strong the vision for what we are doing is today, seven days from now it will only be half as clear and half as strong. Seven days later and another half life has expired. Within 28 days, whatever you started with will be down to a meager 6 1/2% of its original strength.

No one is out there looking for a way to fill their time. People want a cause that is worthy of sacrifice. They want to give themselves to something that will change the world in some small way. And when they take on a responsibility, those in leadership must help them continue to connect the dots, showing them how what they do is directly related to the capacity of the entire organization to change the world.

Without a compelling reason:

- *People are left to work out of duty or obligation alone. And working solely out of duty is the pathway to burnout.*
- *People compete for resources based on personality or positional power rather than vision and strategy.*
- *Turf wars become the name of the day.*
- *Pettiness reigns because pettiness is the clear indicator of a lack of compelling vision... one that deserves personal sacrifice.*