

Empowerment

I was out on a sales call with one of my clients recently, and the woman we were talking to had a poster on the wall behind her desk. It said *I Am Empowered* and featured an image of a bold-looking woman in a business suit, striding confidently forward. It was not a good meeting, mostly because the woman wasn't very forthcoming in answering my client's questions. When we got back to his car, I started the "debrief" by saying, "Well, she was certainly empowered."

"Yeah," he replied. "Empowered to be a jerk!"

Not Really Fair

"That's probably true," I said, "but it's not really fair. Remember, it's not her job to communicate with you, it's your job to communicate with her. And even though you asked the right questions, you have to ask yourself if there was anything you could have done better. If you had it to do over again, would you have done anything differently?"

That's the central question on every debrief I conduct. Every sales call is a business-building opportunity, and it's also a learning opportunity. My whole management/coaching/training philosophy is built around learning as many lessons as you can from every encounter. In this particular debrief, we talked about a couple of alternate approaches, but we also decided that this particular woman was, in fact, a jerk, and that she was not the kind of customer we were looking for. Sometimes it's just that simple.

How About You?

As we drove on towards our next call, I asked my client if he felt empowered.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"Well, you're the sales rep for a highly regarded printing company. You're part of the family. (He's the middle child. His older sister is the graphic designer, and his younger sister works summers and holidays when she's home from school. His mother is the day-to-day manager of the business and his father is the CEO of the printing company and a couple of other businesses.) What kind of decisions are you comfortable making on your own? What kind of decisions do you need to consult with your parents on?"

He thought about that for a while, and then said, "I'm kind of afraid to stick my neck out too far. My father has a habit of chopping it off. He's always telling me to think for myself, but then he tells me what's wrong with whatever I'm thinking."

I'm thinking that this is not the healthiest situation for either a son's or a salesperson's personal development.

A Better Model

I've been working on empowerment with another client. He's a "selling owner" (or at least he's supposed to be), but he's constantly complaining the he can't make time to sell because he has to manage everything else. He even quoted my last *QP* column to me last week, telling me that "management is making sure that everything from the big things to the little things gets done and done right. And I have to do that."

And I agree. To a point. And the point is that every exercise in the kind of micromanagement I believe in is also a teaching opportunity. If a manager does enough teaching, his or her subordinates will need less management. The process works like this: Teach. Test. Reteach if necessary, then retest. Empower. Check from time to time. Address other issues/problems in the same way.

I asked my client if he would rather manage a business or lead a team. His answer was predictable, because he already understands that a team is usually stronger than an individual—but still no stronger than its weakest link. As we've continued this empowerment experiment, he's learned that his weakest link can be made stronger through the application of training and trust. Make no mistake, the trust has to be earned, but a lot can be accomplished in an environment where people are taught to do their jobs according to policy, procedure and expectations, then empowered to do those jobs with a minimum of oversight.

By my definition, micromanagement is not about making all of the decisions, large or small. It's about building a team that can be stronger, more efficient and more effective than any individual.