

## **Secrets to the Success of Organizational Transformation**

### **Secret No. 3: Empowerment<sup>1</sup>**

**Dr. Prasad S. Kodukula<sup>2</sup>**

In the first article of this series, we identified Purpose (P) as the foundation of successful organizational transformation. In the second, we explored Leadership (L) as the force that drives people toward that purpose.

Now we move on to the third element of the P-L-E-A-S-E model: Empowerment.

Empowerment is the deliberate transfer of authority, accountability, and confidence to those closest to the work. It creates an environment where individuals are trusted to think, decide, and act within clearly defined boundaries. Empowerment turns participants into owners.

Purpose determines direction. Leadership energizes movement. But without empowerment, transformation stays centralized. Decisions get bottlenecked at the top. Initiative slows down. Energy dissipates.

Empowerment is often mistaken for delegation. They are not the same. Delegation involves assigning tasks, while empowerment involves giving ownership.

Many transformation efforts fail not because leaders lack vision, but because they hesitate to relinquish control. They announce change, yet keep authority, seek alignment, but limit autonomy. The result is compliance without commitment.

Empowerment shifts that dynamic. It distributes decision-making, speeds up execution, and builds confidence throughout the organization. And that is where real transformation starts.

Empowerment is not just an idea. I have seen what it can unleash countless times.

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## **The Power of Empowerment**

Mentoring is one of the greatest pleasures of my profession.

For several summers, I worked as a research advisor at a local university. Each year, a small team of three to five senior or graduate students had just EIGHT weeks to finish a project, write a technical paper, prepare a poster, and present their work at a campus R&D Expo. An ambitious challenge.

Every team—five in five years—successfully completed their projects. Two produced work strong enough to present at prestigious global conferences.

Different projects. Same principle: ownership.

One year, the assignment was to develop a software application. None of the students had written code before. When they heard about the assignment, they were stunned.

I told them I hadn't written code in a long time and couldn't help with the technical details—but I expressed full confidence they would succeed. I clarified the expected outcome, transferred ownership, and stepped back. I encouraged honest discussion, removed unnecessary restrictions, and made it clear that thoughtful experimentation—even making mistakes—was part of the process. They had the authority to decide, the space to act, and the accountability to deliver.

Within a week, they returned with the first module finished. They had already started coding—and the progress was remarkable for students who had never written a single line before. I was amazed at how fast they had advanced. When I asked how they managed it, they told me they had devoured more than 100 (hundred!) online tutorials in just days. I nearly fell out of my chair.

By the end of the eight-week program, they had built the full application, authored a technical paper, and presented a poster at the R&D Expo—proof of what empowered teams can achieve, super-fast!

## **Empowerment Requires Intentional Leadership**

Empowerment does not happen by accident. It is not a morale tactic. It is not a motivational slogan. It is a leadership decision.

Organizations do not become empowered just because leaders say so. They become empowered when leaders intentionally create environments where authority is clear, trust is genuine, accountability is expected, and initiative is promoted. Empowerment is engineered.

The following strategies transform empowerment from a philosophy into action.

### **Put People First**

Remember from my previous article on leadership? It's the people, stupid!

Ineffective leaders focus on profits, products, processes—and often themselves—before people. Transformational leaders reverse the order.

When Satya Nadella became CEO of Microsoft, the company was struggling with internal competition and cultural stagnation. Nadella shifted the culture from “know-it-all” to “learn-it-all,” emphasizing empathy, collaboration, and a growth mindset. By prioritizing people and culture, Microsoft regained its innovation momentum and became one of the most valuable companies in the world.

Empowerment begins when leaders treat people not as resources, but as creators of value.

### **Create Autonomous Agile Teams**

Frustrated by chronic cost overruns and schedule delays in software projects, seventeen leaders created the Agile Manifesto in 2001. One principle stands out: Build projects around motivated individuals. Give them the environment and support they need, and trust them to get the job done.

Autonomous teams are self-driven and empowered. They make decisions, communicate openly, and trust each other. However, autonomy requires more than permission—it involves removing barriers. You can't empower teams while tying them down with excessive approvals, rigid reporting structures, and bureaucratic hurdles. Leaders need to deliberately eliminate unnecessary controls, simplify governance, and streamline processes.

Companies like Shopify and Atlassian embed team autonomy. Small, empowered product squads move quickly while staying aligned with strategic goals. During the pandemic, Shopify empowered teams to redesign workflows independently, dramatically accelerating digital growth.

Empowerment increases speed, ownership, and flexibility. During transformation, speed is especially important.

### **Clarify Decision Rights and Accountability**

Empowerment without clarity leads to confusion. Empowerment with clarity drives speed.

Leaders often say, “You’re empowered.” But when decisions are challenged, overridden, or endlessly escalated, empowerment falls apart. Teams hesitate. Momentum decreases. Accountability becomes vague. True empowerment depends on clearly defining decision rights.

- Who decides?
- Who needs to be consulted?
- Who needs to be informed?
- What should be escalated—and what can be left out?

At Amazon, the concept of “single-threaded leaders” assigns clear ownership of initiatives to individuals who are fully accountable for the outcomes. Responsibility is unmistakable. At Netflix, managers operate with significant autonomy within defined boundaries. Freedom is paired with responsibility—high autonomy, and high accountability. At NVIDIA, CEO Jensen Huang has built a notably flat structure where lines of authority are clear and unnecessary approvals are minimized.

Empowerment is not surrendering authority; it is structured independence. When decision-making is clear, teams operate more quickly, conflicts lessen, and change accelerates.

### **Ask for Input—and Listen**

Leadership is not a one-way street where the boss talks and everyone else listens.

My experience shows that the higher leaders climb, the more they tend to talk and the less they listen. It should be the other way around.

At Patagonia, leadership actively involved employees in shaping sustainability strategies and long-term governance decisions. By listening carefully and incorporating feedback, the company strengthened its culture and better aligned with its mission. Listening builds trust. Trust fuels empowerment. Empowered teams perform at a higher level.

Compare this to leaders who silence dissent or make hasty decisions without consulting others. Organizational change under such leadership rarely lasts.

### **Give Feedback and Rewards**

Empowered teams become stronger when feedback is ongoing and future focused.

Adobe replaced traditional annual performance reviews with a “Check-In” system—regular conversations focused on growth and development. Engagement increased, voluntary turnover decreased, and performance improved.

Effective feedback answers two questions, emphasizing the positive and the future:

- What did we do right?
- How can we do better next time?

Along with recognition and rewards, feedback enhances ownership and motivation.

### **Treat Mistakes as Mileposts**

No organization changes without experimentation. No bold move happens without mistakes.

When mistakes are punished, teams avoid taking risks. Innovation quietly disappears.

There's a well-known story about former IBM CEO Thomas J. Watson Sr. A young executive made a decision that led to a \$10 million loss. Expecting to be fired, he went to Watson's office to resign. Watson reportedly responded, "Fire you? Why would I do that? We just spent \$10 million educating you."

That reply captures the core of empowerment.

At SpaceX, rapid testing and visible failure are key parts of innovation. Rockets blow up. Lessons are learned. Systems get better. Breakthroughs happen.

Empowerment needs psychological safety. People must feel safe to try, learn, and improve.

Of course, intentional negligence or safety breaches cannot be tolerated. But failure from learning isn't weakness. It's progress.

Treat mistakes as mileposts on the path to success.

### **Conclusion**

Purpose sets direction. Leadership mobilizes. Empowerment unlocks potential.

Without empowerment, transformation is just compliance. With empowerment, it becomes ownership.

When people are trusted to act, encouraged to experiment, and supported in their growth, they surpass expectations. They innovate. They transform.

Empowerment isn't soft leadership; it's strategic leverage.

In the P-L-E-A-S-E model, empowerment is the bridge between vision and execution. Without it, transformation stays an idea—not a reality.

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*Author's Note: Preliminary versions of the articles in this series were previously published as blog posts on my website ([www.kodukula.com](http://www.kodukula.com)). They have been revised and expanded for publication in PMWJ. In preparing the final articles, I used ChatGPT as a support tool for editing, refinement, and language clarity. All ideas, interpretations, conclusions, and final editorial decisions remain my own.*

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## About the Author



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**Dr. Prasad S. Kodukula**, PMP, PgMP, PMI-ACP, DASM, DASSM, BCES, is a USA Today best-selling author, PMI Fellow, thought leader, and entrepreneur with over 35 years of professional experience. A global ambassador for project management, Dr. Kodukula has lectured in nearly 50 countries and worked with more than 40 Fortune 100 companies across all 11 S&P industrial sectors. He is also a frequent keynote speaker and contributor to global project management conferences and publications. He serves as Adjunct Industry Professor at Illinois Tech. He has also taught courses in project management programs at leading universities, including Stanford University, Duke University, and the University of Chicago. Dr. Kodukula teaches a course for NASA on diagnosing root causes and leading the recovery of troubled projects.

As co-founder and CEO of Kodukula & Associates, Inc. and NeoChloris, Inc., he leads these firms in project management and renewable energy, respectively. Recognized three times by the Project Management Institute as “Best of the Best in Project Management,” he has received multiple accolades, including the Illinois Tech Alumni Association Professional Achievement Award and honors from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the states of Arizona, Kansas, and Illinois for his outstanding leadership in

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