

Empowerment, Engagement, and Creativity Drive Innovation

By Kevin McManus, Great Systems LLC

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What Drives Innovation in Your Organization?

Empowerment, engagement, and creativity drive innovation. However, we often fail to make such connections.

Organizations need innovation to sustain a competitive advantage in today's world of work. That said, too many teams and organizations struggle to sustain improvement, let alone innovation.

Most work system designs do not promote high, sustained levels of empowerment, let alone engagement and creativity.



What drives innovation in your workplace? How do you consistently obtain consistent feedback about possible process improvements?

This post explores the connection between these three factors and innovation rates. More importantly, it includes concrete work system design changes to help you realize higher levels of innovation across your organization.

Empowerment Gives People the Chance to Contribute

What percent of your team, let alone your organization, do you truly empower to help make a difference? In too many companies, most people show up, do their job (which leaders often tightly control and limit in scope), and go home.

[General Electric, Allied Signal, and Motorola](#) had success with their Six Sigma initiatives. Others failed to replicate that success. How come? One key factor is that GE and others designed their work systems to consistently empower an ultrahigh percentage of their workforce.

Do the math. You can't generate innovation after innovation unless you give people more freedom to learn, work with others, and expand their work horizons. Ideally, it is part of your leadership development process, strategic plan, capital and expense budgets, and ultimately, your culture to enhance and expand empowerment levels. All too often, leadership egos and actions keep great ideas from spawning into innovations.

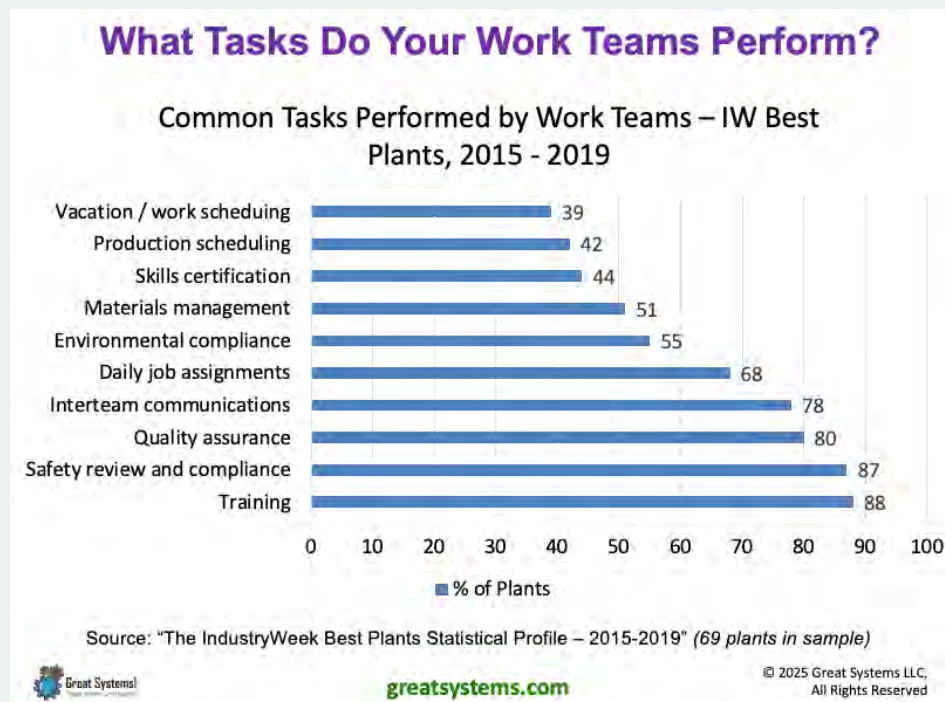
Do Your Job Designs, Measures, and Compensation Plans Encourage Empowerment?

I was fortunate to learn early on in my career that empowerment works because everyone is great at something. I worked in companies where leaders were expected to both be part of improvement teams and let others lead those teams.

Doing so was part of their job description. They were evaluated relative to those defined expectations.

More importantly, leaders must be taught how, and required to, let people make decisions that lead to consistent customer delight. "I'll have to check with my supervisor" is not heard very often in organizations with true empowerment.

This does not happen by chance, however. The opportunity to contribute must be built into your job descriptions, your performance measures, and your compensation plan designs.



"The first step on the road to high performance begins with a choice."

When given the chance, people will make the right choices and do great things. How well is your company built to support, encourage, and reward empowerment?

A suggestion box is not enough. In fact, suggestion boxes are often the kiss of death when it comes to empowerment and innovation potential. Simply put, the designs of our jobs, processes, and systems don't include enough time to effectively evaluate, let alone install, all the great ideas such an approach initially generates.

All too often, the exact opposite is the case. Leaders raise expectations for change, and then dash them.

Engagement Gives People a Reason to Contribute

How many of your people care about their jobs beyond the paychecks that go into their bank accounts? How many of your people go the extra mile to help make the organization better?

What percentage of your staff has bounced as soon as a better job offer comes along?

Engagement won't happen just because the word is part of a mission statement or the biggest word in the company's word bubble poster.

How to Measure Engagement



WIIFM



How do these values vary across work groups?

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LEADING engagement measures:

- Average ideas submitted per employee
- Total dollars saved / # of projects completed
- Survey response rates
- Trended survey scores
- Training hours per employee
- Certifications earned per person

LAGGING engagement measures:

- Absenteeism and retention %'s
- Personal injury rates
- Grievance / complaint severity and frequency rates
- Waste levels, customer complaints, lost revenue

Engagement happens when people feel like their leaders care about both them and their ideas. The systems necessary for true empowerment drive the potential for engagement, but every leader must support those systems.

EACH team leader must consistently treat their people with respect. Plus, they must consistently encourage people to truly make a difference.

Your core measures of leadership effectiveness should include empowerment and engagement dimensions. Use both formal and informal methods to regularly assess dimension-specific support.

True Team Engagement is MORE than 'Mere Satisfaction'

Keep in mind that both internal and external customer engagement goes way beyond 'mere' satisfaction. Effective engagement results in people who will serve as advocates for the organization, its mission, and its values.

Retention rates, absenteeism rates, and idea submission rates are all indicators. Leaders must design each job so that multiple vehicles exist for engagement. Perhaps more importantly, leaders must be taught how to perform their jobs in a manner that encourages engagement vehicle use.

Creativity Turns Great Ideas into Innovations

How many of your people are creative? That percentage is much higher than one thinks. However, the 'prevailing system of management' often hampers our creative abilities.

As Dr. Deming once said, "[The forces of destruction begin with toddlers.](#)" We put people into boxes and expect them to stay there.

We fail to effectively empower our people to try new things or do things differently. They miss the chance to learn and contribute in ways that they never thought possible in a workplace.

Can We Stop the Destruction?

"The prevailing system of management has destroyed our people ..."

People are born with intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, dignity, a curiosity to learn, joy in learning ...



The forces of destruction begin with toddlers - a prize for the best Halloween costume, grades in school, gold stars - and so on up through the university."

- W. Edwards Deming



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Leaders encourage and enable creativity more than teach it. Skills to enhance one's creativity might be readily available, but do your leaders encourage skill development as often as they should? Even when they are encouraged and developed, restrictive work systems, and overly restrictive leadership practices, prevent people from putting their ideas to work.

How often do you recognize and reward creativity in your company? How often do you expect creative contributions as part of one's job description?

Eight Concrete Ideas to Help Empowerment, Engagement, and Creativity Drive Innovation

Several systematic changes to help foster the growth of these three concepts can be found among the above paragraphs. Here is a summary list to help you create your own plan. How can you change your workplace into one where innovation occurs regularly?

#1: Benchmark those companies who have demonstrated the ability to effectively empower and engage their workforce

[Recipients of the Malcom Baldrige Quality Award](#) provide one great source of ideas in these areas. The design of the criteria recognizes companies who systematically empower and engage their staff to help foster excellence and innovation.

You can study these best practice work system designs to avoid reinvention of your work systems wheels. If you have any questions, please feel free to drop me a note!

#2: Redesign jobs to provide time for formal team-based activities

Workplace job descriptions and expense budgets include time for formal empowerment activities in high performance companies. Systematic empowerment examples include process improvement teams and pre-shift work group meetings.

Other examples include focus groups (safety committees, recognition teams, and planning teams) and company-sponsored volunteerism.

#3: Use social media, intranet pages, and other technology to provide ways for all team members to share ideas and build relationships

Your 21st century company bulletin boards can come in many forms. More importantly, you can design them to help facilitate high levels of two-way communication. The people who do the work are your best sources if you want to identify process improvement ideas and process barriers.

Give them effective ways to share their ideas. Also, provide 'bottom up' feedback on a regular basis.

#4: Build formal skills training with an innovation focus into all jobs

Most formal education people receive in life offers little on how empowerment, engagement, and creativity drive innovation. Common 'best practice' topics include how to manage group dynamics and facilitate group events.

Others focus on how to understand communication styles and enhance creativity and innovation. What percentage of your staff competency maps include these skills?

#5: Measure empowerment, engagement, and creativity levels at least annually as part of a formal engagement survey

Many companies now conduct culture / satisfaction / engagement surveys on a less frequent basis, such as every other year. They often base their logic on cost versus the low level of change the organization experiences between annual surveys.

However, today's technology allows you to conduct short, pop-up surveys very often. The low rate of change problem is often more of a 'no time for projects' job design issue.

#6: Include measures of leadership support in your annual survey

We tend to consistently do the work that we measure. Use of bottom-up leadership support feedback from each leader's work team members results in behavior change. Check out the [Survey-Feedback-Action process used by FedEx](#) for a great work systems model. The addition of a **Leadership Index** to your annual assessment offers one way to obtain such measures.

#7: Formally recognize anyone who contributes to meaningful process change

What percentage of your workforce receives formal recognition for their contributions each year? How effective are your formal recognition approaches from your internal customer's perspective?

Also, assess and improve your formal recognition plans over time to help maintain their effectiveness. The use of daily, consistent, and meaningful informal recognition from leaders at all levels must also support the formal process.

#8: Stop the use of processes that discourage empowerment, engagement, and creativity

'One winner' recognition programs such as 'Employee of the Month' discourage more people than they positively motivate. Similarly, motivation shifts occur when we tolerate poor performance or compensate only a few people for the work of many.

Finally, when we fail to provide skill development paths to all staff, we also drive down empowerment, engagement, and creativity levels.

Here is more Great Systems website content with a WORK TEAM ENGAGEMENT focus:

- [How to Measure and Improve Work Team Effectiveness](#)
- [How to Increase Work Team Ownership and Engagement](#)
- [Work Team Characteristics for Three Team Types](#)
- [How to Measure Leadership Behavior Effectiveness](#)

About the author

As Chief Excellence Officer of Great Systems LLC, Kevin McManus provides virtual coaching and content to help people use proven best practices to enhance and optimize their daily work systems.

Over forty years of work experience in roles such as Industrial Engineer, Training Manager, Production Manager, Plant Manager, and Director of Quality give Kevin a 'real life work' perspective relative to daily work process optimization, work team engagement and empowerment, and sustainable operational excellence.



As a contract trainer for the TapRoot® root cause analysis process, Kevin has taught over 450 courses and further enhanced his ability to help leaders proactively minimize risk, reduce errors, and improve reliability. Kevin holds an undergraduate degree in Industrial Engineering and an MBA. He served as a national Malcolm Baldrige Performance Excellence Award Examiner for twenty years, including a three-year term on the national Judge's Panel.

Kevin has authored the monthly performance improvement column for Industrial and Systems Engineer magazine for over 20 years, is an Institute of Industrial and Systems Engineering Fellow and has been a member of IISE for over forty years. His newest book, "Different Company – How the Best Build Great Organizations", will be published in late 2025.

If you would like more information about the improvement tools and systems I have to offer, please send me an e-mail at kevin@greatsystems.com.

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"The first step on the road to high performance begins with a choice."

Kevin McManus, Great Systems!



Great Continuous Improvement Books by Kevin McManus!



Pursuing Process Excellence

- 150 pages of ideas and examples that will help you accelerate and sustain your process improvement efforts
- Over 25 examples of 'best practice' assessment tools that leaders can use to encourage and support high performance work
- 12 team exercises that you can use to begin applying each concept as it is learned



Mistake Proofing and Corrective Action Writing

- 156 pages of exercises, tools, and examples to help you learn about and practice the fundamentals of mistake proofing and corrective action writing
- 14 exercises you can use to practice the five key mistake proofing tactics and identify tasks and processes to target for improvement
- Over 100 proven techniques to help minimize the risk and error potential associated with daily job completion



Error Proof

- 162 pages of examples, strategies and dialogue questions to help you stop daily goofs for good
- Over 100 proven best practices that you can use to help error proof your key work processes
- Can be paired with the 100-page workshop workbook that contains 13 team exercises to help you begin applying key ideas



Facilitating and Leading Teams

- 182 pages of ideas, tools, and examples to help you improve work team, project team, and focus team effectiveness
- 10 assessments that will help you identify areas of strength and weakness relative to work and project team support
- Over 20 team exercises that will help you optimize your use of teams and improve meeting effectiveness, while also practicing your facilitation skills



Lean Tool Use Basics

- 150 pages of exercises, tools, and examples to help you learn about and practice the fundamentals of lean thinking
- 13 exercises you can practice to learn more about using the five key lean tools, creating a lean culture, and planning for lean success
- Two assessments to help you gauge the degree of support your lean efforts require and how much progress you make

kevin@greatsystems.com
206.226.8913

greatsystems.com

