Empowerment in NRCS: What Works!

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i

Table of Contents

	page
Acknowledgments	**i**
Purpose	**1**

Project Design 1

Findings 2

Factors Contributing to Empowerment 3

- **I. Communication** 3
- **II. Technology** 3
- **III. Field Structure** 4
- **IV. Management Style** 6
- **V. Level of Administrative Support in the Field** 6
- **VI. Organization Culture** 7
- **VII. Training** 7
- **VIII. Personal Characteristics** 7

Recommendations 8

References 9

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to develop a profile of the characteristics of empowerment as they exist in a variety of field settings within NRCS. The profile was developed from a sample of states known for having empowered employees who serve their customers effectively. This report discusses the characteristics that are common to empowered employees and empowered organizations. This report does not pretend to provide an exhaustive list of the characteristics of empowerment, but rather it contains a summary of those elements that are currently at work within those states sampled.

By providing a model using common elements of empowered employees along with the organizational structures that support these employees, the Social Sciences Institute (SSI) is helping to spread the word on current activities. With the dissemination of this information, NRCS managers may gain insight as to how to empower their employees in order to serve agency customers more fully.

As you know, empowerment operates on many different levels. These levels not only include organizational, administrative and communication linkages, but also complex social psychological components that are embedded in attitudes and behavior. The SSI recognizes that many other NRCS state organizations foster and support empowerment in ways that are not captured in this document. The Institute urges you to submit your examples of empowerment to SSI's Internet web site. The address is as follows:

HTTP://people.nrcs.wisc.edu/SocSciInstitute/????

We can add these examples to this profile and make them available throughout NRCS. In this way, the SSI can display profiles of empowerment in the hopes of fostering the adoption of some of these proven techniques and strategies.

Project Design

The quality management specialist in each of the NRCS regions was asked to select at least one state in which empowerment was “at work.” The SSI worked with state conservationists in each identified state and a contact person within the state was subsequently named.

During July 1996, telephone interviews were conducted in Illinois, Michigan, Montana, Texas, Alabama, Oregon, Connecticut and Pennsylvania. The SSI investigator asked the contact person within the state to discuss the concept of empowerment and its application in day-to-day field activities.

The SSI investigator used the following questions to begin the phone interviews.

- What is empowerment?
- What factors contribute to empowerment?

After these initial guiding questions were posed, a free flowing conversation followed. New topic areas were broached and discussions revolved around specific empowerment techniques.

Based on the interviews with the state contacts, the following list of topics was used to organize the findings.

I. Communication
II. Technology
III. Field structure
IV. Management style
V. Level of administrative support
VI. Organizational culture
VII. Training
VIII. Personal characteristics

Findings

The findings from the interviews are organized by question/topic area. Where appropriate, examples are provided, which are shaded in the text. These examples further explain the concept or application.

What is empowerment?

Empowerment is twofold in nature:

a) Empowerment is the process by which leadership transfers authority and responsibility to the lowest field level in order for these people to make implementation and application decisions.

b) Empowerment can only be accomplished if the necessary resources and information are provided, including defined goals, expected outcomes, access to information, access to expertise, sufficient budget, adequate time frame, ample materials, and appropriate training.

Factors Contributing to Empowerment

I. Communication

1. Shared information at all levels

2. Equal access to needed information

3. Leaders disseminate information using a medium that is accessible by all; for example, voice mail or E-mail

4. Involvement of a broad spectrum of partners, including districts, private organizations universities, etc.

5. Providing a newsletter to report on "what works" and "what doesn’t work" in the field.

6. Individuals and teams operating at the field level are encouraged to communicate interests, problems and concerns to other teams and the designated leadership.

In most field offices, Alabama has quarterly team meetings with the conservation district being part of the team. Field staff, rather than state leadership, are encouraged to select the topics for the meeting. In addition, tours of other districts are used so that field staff can observe conservation practices "at work" throughout the state.

II. Technology

1. Need to have compatible hardware and software especially with the new FOCS platform. Equipment needs to be the latest technology affordable for field offices (586 computers, laser jet printers and modems).

2. Voice mail in all field offices helps to ensure shared access to information.

3. FAX machines in all offices.

4. “E mail” in all offices, especially for bulletins, announcements, etc.

5. Mobile phones to make use of opportunities to easily send and receive information on a real-time basis.

6. Use of printed or hard copies to communicate with our partners.

III. Field Structure

1. Leadership team is composed of state conservationist and assistants who have responsibilities for various field activities.

2. States in our survey mostly use “team leaders,” rather than area conservationists.

3. Use of resource teams with watersheds as one resource unit (while still addressing other political units). At the same time, these states continued to provide one-on-one on-farm/ranch assistance to customers

   Montana has 12 resource teams covering watersheds that extend over a 5 county area.

4. Teams need to be issue specific as well as interdisciplinary in nature in order to address priority resource concerns. Teams are able to call on expertise from other teams.

   A Pennsylvania team is composed of NRCS staff as well as state agencies and local township officials. Their specific charge is to address emergency work associated with 1996 flooding.

5. Qualities that mark an empowered team include synergy, respect among team members, commitment to follow-through, humor, enthusiasm, flexibility, forward thinking, and boundary consciousness -- but not limited by boundaries.

6. Empowered teams have charters.

   Michigan provided an excellent example of a charter for teams:

   a. Clear charge associated with a desired outcome.

   b. Must have “sideboards” or boundaries that define its operation. For example, a team is not allowed to do whatever it decides, whenever it decides, or how it decides. The team must operate within previously agreed upon parameters.

   c. Need to specify the level of authority for a particular team. Some teams may be responsible for developing a set of recommendations, but may not be responsible for implementing these recommendations. Authority levels must be clearly communicated by the team leadership when the team’s charge is established

   d. Need to understand priority of the task in relation to other assigned work.

   e. Need to know the expected time frame for completing the task.

f. For designated tasks, the team may need its own budget, along with the authority to manage and execute that budget.

g. Team must have a designated individual from state leadership whose role is to provide support and guidance and to serve as a resource contact.

h. Team members must have the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities to accomplish the task.

I. A mechanism must be in place to ensure accountability, to give closure, to provide feedback, and to dispense appropriate consequences for irresponsible behavior.

j. The team needs a clear understanding of the relationship between the evaluation of their performance and the goals of the strategic plan at all levels (i.e., district, state, region, and nation).

k. The team needs to be able to manage FTE's in order to meet their strategic goals.

l. The team must be responsible for acquiring any needed expertise whether that expertise resides in an NRCS employee or one of our partners.

m. The team performance plan must be tied to outcomes and the outcomes/products must be tied to the impact on the resources.

n. The team must have a clear understanding of how to translate action items from the strategic plan in order to get conservation on the ground.

o. Technical assistance must be tied to the strategic plan.

p. Teams must rate their own performance on an annual basis. The team rating should be separate from an individual's contribution to the team.

IV. Management Style

1. States have adopted a *leader empowerment* paradigm as opposed to a *management hands-on* paradigm.

2. Leaders prepare people for change and how to embrace change.

3. Apart from the “legal, moral, and ethical” boundaries, leaders adopt a “let’s look at it and how it can work” attitude, rather than a “black-white, yes-no, either-or” attitude.

4. An empowered perspective puts into place a transitional plan that takes the organization from a “line and staff” field structure to an empowered team operation. This plan clearly defines roles and responsibilities as well as the transfer of authority.

5. Leaders empower by transferring responsibility, authority, information, and resources to the lowest level of field operation.

6. Leaders promote risk taking and allow for failures.

V. Level of Administrative Support in the Field

1. Administrative functions, such as procurement, budget, or contracting, can be combined or grouped using any number of configurations of districts and states within a Region.

2. Commitment to transfer a defined level of authority to the field operational level.

   In Montana each field office has procurement authority up to $500.00.

3. Designated positions can be transferred to the needed resource area.

   Oregon's position -- Food Security Act Coordinator -- was transferred to the watershed having the highest percentage of FSA work.

VI. Organizational Culture

1. Replace "boss satisfaction" with "customer satisfaction."

2. Agency must value differences in perspectives, abilities, experiences and background.

3. Commitment to quality improvement should be achieved through an annual assessment of the agency and its partners’ needs.

4. Commitment to “grassroots” input such as the Chief’s forums and state forums.

5. States are willing to look at any and all sources for improvement, within the public and/or private sectors.

VII. Training

1. Commitment to ongoing training in all areas as part of quality improvement.

2. Teams should be trained in multi-facets of teamwork including, but not limited to, team establishment, team maintenance, team achievement, interpersonal skills, establishing priority areas, and how to integrate resource assessments and state and regional strategic plans with local, "on the ground" priorities.

   Montana had 20 employees who went through training with IBM to become certified to teach and train 16 team modules.

3. Target training to particular field offices or teams who request training or have a demonstrated need for the training.

   Alabama allocates a segment of their annual 2-day quality reviews in field offices for training. If field staff have indicated that they desire training in a specific area such as budgeting or conservation work, then a portion of the quality review is devoted to satisfying this request.

VIII. Personal Characteristics

1. Openness to change.
2. Willingness to assume risks, including the risk of failure.
3. Ability to work cooperatively within a team environment.
4. Willingness to be accountable.
5. Willingness to accept consequences.
6. Ability to operate from one's own set of personal values.
7. Applying personal integrity to all situations.
8. Managers must become leaders who are willing and able to transfer authority.

Recommendations

- Put into place a transitional plan that takes the organization from a "line and staff" field arrangement to an empowered team structure. This plan needs to clearly define roles and responsibilities as well as the transfer of authority.

- In most circumstances, adopt resource teams as a structure for field operations, without at the same time neglecting one-on-one assistance. Resource teams need to be able to call on other members of NRCS and our partners for any needed assistance or expertise.

- Develop a charter for each team.

- Provide training in interpersonal skills, teamwork, and team maintenance. In addition, train employees to determine the relationship between resource needs assessments, state and regional strategic plans and “conservation on the ground.”

- Commit to adopting the latest and most appropriate communication and technology (including FOCS platform, electronic and voice mail, mobile phones, laptop computers, etc.) so that all levels of the organization can share information in every possible way.

- Transfer administrative functions, such as procurement, to the lowest level of field operations.

- Assess on an annual basis the needs, interests, and concerns of our conservation partners.

- Replace “boss satisfaction” with “customer satisfaction.”

References

Paul Johnson, Internal Correspondence, Memorandum, May 4, 1994.

NRCS Regional Appraisals
1996 Midwest, Northern Plains, South Central, Southeast, East, and West Regional Appraisal Reports.