Let's begin with a game – Would You Rather? (Leadership Edition). Ready?

Round one. Would you rather lead a team that consistently delivers strong results exactly as you ask, or a team that delivers strong results and regularly brings you ideas that make the work even better?

Round two. Would you rather lead a team that knows when to come to you for help, or a team that knows how to work through challenges on their own?

Interesting, right? Because, honestly, neither option is terrible. But there is a difference between them. One creates a team that can follow you. The other creates a team that can move without you. And that's what we're talking about today. Empowerment.

Empowerment is creating the conditions where people can become everything they're capable of becoming. Now, here's the question: What actually creates empowerment? But before we answer that question, let's clear up one common misunderstanding. Empowerment is not the same thing as delegation. They are closely related, but they're not the same. Delegation transfers responsibility. Empowerment transfers ownership. Delegation says, "Can you do this for me?" Empowerment says, "Can you own this with me?" Delegation can get today's work done. Empowerment develops tomorrow's leaders.

Let me give you an example. Let's say you are leading an event. Parking is your responsibility. You could delegate it to someone. “Um, would you make sure the cones are out before the event and put away afterwards?” That's delegation.

Or you could empower someone. “I'd love for you to own the parking. Make sure the cones are out before the event and put away afterward. If you see a better way to do this or realize that you need more volunteers, make the changes. I'll support you however I I can and however you need.” The task hasn't changed, but ownership has. The person isn't simply completing an assignment anymore. They're leading an area. They're solving problems. They're improving systems. They're growing. Now, whether it's a parking cone, a sales pipeline, a client relationship, or a P&L, the principle applies. Same task, different ownership. One creates helpers. The other develops leaders.

Now, hear me. Delegation isn't bad. In fact, it can be the first step toward empowerment. As trust and competence grow, leaders can transfer more ownership. People move from “I help with this” to “I lead this” to “I own this.” And you can only empower people to the level that they have been developed.

So going back to our original question – What actually creates empowerment? Empowerment happens when three conditions are present. Vision - Means - Intention. These aren't leadership tips. They're three conditions, and they're equally important. You can have a compelling vision

and a highly motivated person, but if they don't have the means to execute, empowerment breaks down. Or you can give people the vision and the means, but if they don't take ownership, empowerment breaks down. All three matter. When vision, means, and intention are present in equal proportion, people are positioned to be their very best. They're empowered. So, let's look at each one.

Vision. People need to know where they're going and why it matters. Without vision, people can just be busy all day long and never understand the significance of what they're doing. Great leaders don't just assign tasks. They connect people to purpose. So ask yourself, "Do my people understand where we're going and why it matters?"

Next comes means. Do people have what they need to succeed? The right tools, the right training, the right authority, the right support. Sometimes we ask people to own something but never give them what they need to succeed. That's not empowerment. That is frustration.

Then comes intention. Now this is the one a leader can't give. You can provide vision. You can provide means, but as leaders we can't choose someone's intention. But, you can pay attention to it. You can look for the person who follows through, takes initiative, cares about the outcome, not just completing a task. The person who says, "I see a problem and here's what I think we should do." These are signs of ownership. And as leaders, we can respond to those signs by increasing trust, responsibility, and ownership. We create an environment where ownership is recognized, developed, and even celebrated. That's why empowerment is both a leader's responsibility and a personal choice.

So, what does empowerment look like practically? Well, one of my favorite leadership stories comes from Navy Captain David Marquet, commander of the USS Santa Fe. When he took command, he inherited a culture where everyone waited for permission. The crew had vision. They knew their mission. They had means. They were highly trained. But they had learned to wait for the captain to tell them what to do. So, Captain Marquet set out to create an empowered crew. And he changed one phrase. Instead of the phrase "Request permission to…" he asked his crew to begin saying, "I intend to…" Those three words changed how the crew saw their role. "I intend to…" meant I understand the mission. I've thought this through. I'm prepared to act. That's empowerment. Not abandoning people, not controlling them. Developing people.

So, let me ask you, on your team in your organization, would people come to you with "Permission to…" or "I intend to…"? But here's the challenge: When we're trying to empower people, we can unintentionally create the opposite. We can give vision, we can give means, and still get in the way of intention. Author Liz Wiseman calls these leaders accidental diminishers. As leaders, we're not intentionally trying to hold people back. We're trying to help. But in doing so, we can create dependence and erode empowerment. So, here are three ways that that can happen.

First, as leaders, we answer every question. Someone brings us a problem, we immediately give a solution. It feels helpful, but eventually people stop thinking for themselves because they know we'll think for them. Sometimes the most empowering response isn't an answer, it's a question. What do you think?

See, once we get in the habit of thinking for people, it's easy to start acting for them, too. And that leads us to our second thing that unintentionally erodes empowerment. As leaders, we step in too quickly. We rescue, we fix, we take over because sometimes the stakes are high. And there is risk in letting someone else make the decision. And if we're honest, we often step in because we just don't want to look bad. But capability grows through experience. People need room to learn, make decisions, and even make mistakes.

And then the third, as leaders, we become indispensable. Everything comes through us. Every decision, every approval, every problem. At first, this feels like really strong leadership. But eventually, it becomes the bottleneck. Mature leaders don't create followers who need them. They develop leaders who can thrive without them. That's empowerment. Because ultimately empowerment isn't just about getting better results. It's about what happens to an organizations when leaders stop asking "How much can I accomplish?" and start asking "How can I help people become everything they're capable of becoming?" That's how a culture of empowerment is built. That's how we raise up the next generation of leaders. Our ceiling becomes their floor. And if we do it well, they just don't stand there where we stood. They go further. They go farther. It's one of the greatest privileges of leadership – Not simply accomplishing something ourselves, but helping someone else take their next step.

Empowerment is creating the conditions where people can become everything they're capable of becoming. And underneath all of it is one thing. Trust. Trust isn't a fourth condition of empowerment. It's the environment that allows the other three to flourish. Vision without trust feels like manipulation. Means without trust feels like micromanagement. And trust is needed for intention to grow.

So let me leave you with one final question. When people work with you, are they becoming more dependent on you, or more capable because of your leadership? Now let's make this really practical this week. Identify one area where you're still the bottleneck. Ask yourself: Does my team have the vision? Do they have the means? And, have I given them room to take ownership?

Vision - Means - Intention. When those three things come together, people don't just accomplish more, they become more. And that is the heart of empowerment.