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Autonomy and Engagement



In this third piece of a nine-part series, we look at the next section of the Jabian Engagement Framework: How autonomy increases employees' engagement.

By Fred Jewell and Tracy Reznik

Micromanagement. Tedium. Constraints. Restraints. Incarceration. Policies and rules that restrict our freedom.

Those are not very engaging words or ideas, are they? We recoil from most of them because they restrict our autonomy. Having the right amount of autonomy is a key driver of engagement. Autonomy covers several different concepts, including flexibility, freedom, the ability to make choices, and a lack of tedium.

In Jabian's Engagement Framework, we tend to think about autonomy as the amount of freedom people have in choosing how they work, who they work with, what they work on, and when and where they work.

Short of being your own boss in your own organization, it's rare to find a role in any organization that allows complete autonomy on all of those fronts. And that's a good thing for most people. Growth and relationships, the two engagement drivers we last wrote about, have unlimited upside. Autonomy, though, has a sweet spot for everyone.



How Much Autonomy Is Too Much?

Too much autonomy can stress us out. If you started in a new role and your new boss said simply, "Welcome to

the team. Good luck!," you'd probably feel pretty uncomfortable. Conversely, we often don't know how much we appreciate the autonomy we have until it's taken away.

How do we decide how much is too much? One trigger that indicates that you have too much autonomy is when you start to feel "out of sight, out of mind" with your home team, including your boss, peers, direct reports, and boundary partners. If you are not being tapped as often for ad hoc assignments, projects, or even brainstorming sessions, you may be experiencing too much autonomy and will need to reconnect with your colleagues.

We're all comfortable operating within a framework. Even when we manage ourselves, we put guidelines and constraints on ourselves to ensure we are fit, healthy, and otherwise engaged with the world. Stress comes from a lack of purpose, goals that guide our actions, and norms we use to work with our coworkers, family, and friends.

If we have too much autonomy, we're often frustrated by the lack of structure and guidance, or we get lost, become distracted, and lose focus on what's important to ourselves and the business. Some of us need constraints to get things done, such as a deadline, say, to write an article for your company's publication. Others might tackle

tasks as soon as they are assigned and beat deadlines by weeks—but they can't work at home because there are just too many distractions. Sometimes, it takes someone else to point out that we're not productive when we have too much autonomy.



What If the Level of Autonomy is Not Enough?

When there's too little autonomy, it may be because there's too much direction or micromanagement of the work. The ability and willingness to do and think independently decreases. Employees can develop a "why should I?" attitude and become complacent. Teams start to look like, act like, and think like the leader because only the leader's decisions are implemented. Fewer promotions are granted out of a team with lower levels of autonomy because new skills are not being developed and there's less growth overall.

So, the sweet spot for autonomy is highly individualistic. As a manager, it's important to understand the level of autonomy each of your team members desires and can manage.



Autonomy and Policy

Some of the most contentious and challenging policy decisions we see

companies struggle with have to do with autonomy. Policies around teleworking, flexible hours, and paid time off are great examples. Again, everyone has a sweet spot when it comes to maximizing autonomy.

For example, we've seen companies with thick policy manuals defining exactly when teleworking is allowed. They outline to the nth degree the specific setups and situations employees must have at home (or other remote office locations). Some people prefer that kind of specificity. They want to know what it takes to avoid breaking the rules or facing a difficult conversation about expectations.

Others want to be unencumbered and prefer a policy that simply says, "work it out with your supervisor and do the right thing."

What's the right answer? There's not one because, of course, it depends. It depends on how aligned your organization is around your organizational values, which include tenets such as

mission, vision, purpose, and values. If an organization:

- has achieved strong alignment around its values;
- fosters strong relationships across all levels of the workforce;
- and has a workforce that treats colleagues, company, and customers fairly...

...then a "do the right thing" kind of policy around telework, flexible hours, and even unlimited paid time off can work.

Lack of alignment across those tenets usually spurs leadership to apply strict policy and strong governance. The problem with strict policy and strong governance is that it tends to treat everyone the same, and as we've mentioned, the ideal level of autonomy is highly dependent upon the individual.

The organizations with the most engaged and fulfilled workforces

find ways to tailor autonomy to the individual. That requires trust, strong relationships, and deeply felt and well-adopted values. Employees who build trust with their supervisors will find themselves gaining more and more autonomy, but those who violate that trust will usually see their leadership finding ways to put constraints in place.

In a "do the right thing" policy environment, communication is key. Employees and their supervisors may perceive "the right thing" differently unless there's a direct conversation about "the right thing." The employees may perceive that their boss expects them to be at their desks all day, every day, but rather, their boss is happy to allow them flexibility to work at home occasionally. Having those individual conversations around autonomy is key.

Individual conversations are also key to defining how work is accomplished. What process should be followed to reach a goal? Who should I work with to achieve that goal? Leaders

Tedium's Effect on Autonomy

Tedium is another aspect that affects engagement. Tasks people find tedious adversely affect autonomy. A quick poll on Facebook and LinkedIn about what tasks people found tedious elicited responses such as:

- Doing laundry, especially matching socks
- Emptying the dishwasher
- Sifting through emails, especially ones with large distribution lists
- Unfocused conference calls with too many attendees
- Answering the same questions over and over again
- Comparing multiple documents to find differences
- Updating status and availability in multiple places or formats

Most of us would rather spend our time doing something more fun, or at least less tedious, than most of those things. Do your best to eliminate tedium for people through more efficient processes, better technology, and the right level of oversight.

It's interesting that nobody said "cutting up lettuce" in our informal poll. We suspect that problem was solved with the widespread availability of prewashed and cut bags of salad greens at five times the cost of a head of lettuce. This costly convenience factor should be an indication of how important it is to address tedium (and how much of a business opportunity tedium represents).

who micromanage their employees want to dictate exactly how and with whom a task must be accomplished.

Sometimes, that makes total sense. That may be the best approach when safety or product quality is at stake, or when the leader is certain they know the best (and only?) way to accomplish a task. In most cases, however, allowing employees to choose how they get their work done allows for diversity of thought and the potential for gaining new and more efficient processes.

The ability to experiment and try new ways of working is a key to innovation. Without the autonomy to try new things, we stifle growth. A strong relationship, good communication, and the right level of autonomy is key to efficiency and innovation.



THE ORGANIZATIONS WITH THE MOST ENGAGED AND FULFILLED WORKFORCES FIND WAYS TO TAILOR AUTONOMY TO THE INDIVIDUAL.

Control leads to compliance; autonomy leads to engagement.

—Daniel H. Pink (author of *Drive*)



The Right Level of Autonomy

Finding the sweet spot for autonomy is an ongoing task that requires constant communication and reevaluation of the current situation. It's different for every individual. But when you find it, you can integrate work with your personal life in a healthy and guilt-free way.

Role clarity increases because teams are aware of decision-making rights, expectations, and team responsibilities. Employees are more likely to take on stretch assignments because their engagement level may be higher. Innovation is encouraged and valued.

So how do you do this? Take the time to talk with your team members. Have a conversation with your boss about his or her expectations. Share your preferences and work through what it would take for your supervisor to comfortably provide you with the autonomy you'd like.

And as a leader, figure out what level of autonomy your team can handle. You might find that getting more alignment around purpose, goals, and values allows you to provide more autonomy to your workforce which, in turn, spurs more growth and innovation.

Next time, we'll talk about the security driver, another driver with limited upside, but with a paralyzing downside. ●

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