

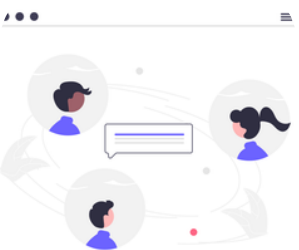
# Autonomy Transcription



We've all heard the term autonomy thrown around the workplace, but rarely do we have the opportunity to actually work in such an environment. The reasons are many, but they almost all boil down to leadership: Micromanagement and the reluctance to let go of control.



In the context of exponential organizations, we describe autonomy as: self-organizing, multi-disciplinary teams, operating with decentralized authority. But there is another angle we need to understand with autonomy.



In essence it's just about trying stuff out for three reasons. In the context of Self-Determination Theory, autonomy can be defined as "the need to be in charge of our experiences and actions". This is a slightly different definition, from the traditional idea that autonomy equals independence. The distinction here is that autonomy, in this context, demonstrates an enthusiasm and eagerness to participate in various activities or behaviors. This occurs as a result of the alignment between an individual's true interests, values and purpose.



With autonomy, there is always a sense of choice that allows people to engage in activities wholeheartedly, rather than acting on something purely because they are told to do so. Self-Determination is a theory of human motivation, developed by psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan. It outlines three core needs: Autonomy, Competence (or Mastery) and Relatedness.



Similarly, Daniel Pink writes in his best-selling book 'Drive', that The Surprising Truth of What Motivates Us' defines 3 core elements of motivation: autonomy, mastery and purpose.

Autonomy is the desire to have control over what we do. And purpose is the feeling that we're doing something that matters. Mastery is the satisfaction that comes from becoming better at what we do.



Regardless of the context or culture, everyone requires autonomy in order to feel satisfied. More and more studies are revealing that embracing autonomy in the workplace, leads to positive effects on well-being and job satisfaction. Increased autonomy at work is known to translate into higher levels of motivation, creativity and happiness of employees.

Whilst leaders have known this for a while, many struggle to maintain a balance between employee empowerment and operational discipline. This as they cling to the notion that freedom and control are a zero sum game, often oscillating between the two extremes.



The answer seems to be to stop micromanaging people. To ensure they know what is expected of them, what they can count on and to give them the necessary resources needed to do their jobs well. This is what some people refer to as “freedom within a framework”.



A great example of how autonomy can be structured and how it can benefit the company, is a software company called Valve. Valve is a leading entertainment and technology company with a very unique culture based on Autonomy. One of its most interesting attributes is how it treats newly hired employees who are given a humorous and informative handbook, to help them navigate Valve’s unique culture. This includes the fact that at the beginning of their employment, no one assigns them a particular piece of work. They are asked to pick their own projects based on their interest and aspirations. As Valve’s original employee handbook mentions - “Deciding what to work on can be the hardest part of your job at Valve.



This is because, as you’ve found out by now, you were not hired to fill a specific job description. You were hired to constantly be looking around, for the most valuable work you could be doing.”



According to a Gallup study in 2017, only 33% of employees were engaged in their jobs and 51% were actively looking for new ones. From my experience with corporates, I doubt this figure has changed much. Many CEOs still describe one of their ultimate challenges as understanding how to increase engagement and motivation.



Netflix is an interesting example of autonomy in the workplace. They go into a lot of depth on their site to explain their culture, and their internal concept of “Freedom and responsibility”. All before you apply for a job. Netflix’s goal is to inspire people, instead of managing them. This is reflected in the trust that they place on each individual to do “what they think best”. This is of course subjective, but given the guidance and actions that support this culture, individuals understand the responsibility that comes with autonomy, as well as what is expected of them.



Ritz-Carlton - a traditional brand in hospitality has also found the recipe for success by giving their employees the freedom to delight guests to the tune of \$2,000 USD per guest per day, with complete discretion and autonomy.

Their articulation of what autonomy means in their daily work? A card, carried in the pockets of every employee, with the following written on it: “We are Ladies and Gentlemen, serving Ladies and Gentlemen”.

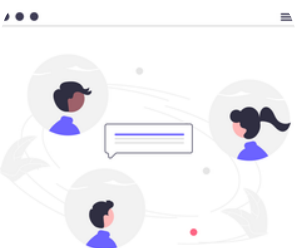


Such employee empowerment delivers the priceless gem of establishing trust between an employer and employee. It boosts employee engagement as well as customer satisfaction and loyalty every day. And both of these have bottom-line impact far beyond the \$2,000 USD that is being spent.



Spotify built one of the best engineering cultures by taking autonomy one step further. In essence, designing their own alternative approach to agile. Most parts of their structure weren't designed up front. They evolved by doing lots of experimenting and having a change-friendly culture.

They organized for autonomy, breaking their engineering teams into 8-person autonomous squads. They gave them the ability to choose what to work on. This was built on the understanding that alignment is paramount to a higher degree of autonomy.



Additionally, they let people choose which agile practices and tools to use in their work whilst also applying open source methodologies to internal products. Keeping squads autonomous, has minimized the number of hand-offs, which in turn, allows their product to scale without getting bogged down by dependencies and coordination. The result is one of the best engineering cultures in technology in the world, and an incredible product.



In a fast-scaling organization, unique culture based on purpose, experimentation and autonomy, is the glue that keeps the team and the organization together, through the quantum leaps of exponential growth. To build such a culture is not easy, but when successful, it becomes the company's greatest intangible asset. Leaders in many successful organizations attribute their unique culture as a major source of competitive advantage, often above the technological capability or their products.



To implement Autonomy in your organization, you can focus on the following 3 elements:

1. Competence - people need to have the experience, skills and tools to succeed at their work
2. Shared understanding - people need to understand where the organization is heading and how, what they do, contributes to its success
3. Trust - people need to trust each other and their managers. They also need to feel trusted in return.





Additionally, MTP, Dashboards and Social Technologies are all ExO Attributes that support and complement autonomy, inside an Exponential Organization's culture and operations. The MTP gives the underlying reason and motivation for autonomy. Dashboards and related coordination frameworks, such as OKRs, give clarity of direction and track progress. Social Technologies enable peer to peer communication, collaboration and value creation.



As the world around us becomes increasingly uncertain, building a culture of Autonomy not only increases empowerment inside your organization, but also allows your people to lead the way forward. Much beyond a simple tool for employee engagement, Autonomy is a major source of inspiration, motivation and competitive advantage. This may well be the key recipe for your organization's continued future success.

