Empowering Employees
A How-to-guide for Assisting Autonomy

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EMPOWERING EMPLOYEES:

A HOW-TO-GUIDE FOR ASSISTING AUTONOMY

JUNE 2019

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INTRODUCTION

Many executives operating in today's increasingly dynamic and digital context want to empower their employees. Why is that the case? One reason is that organizations need novel ideas to become competitive and to differentiate themselves in the marketplace. Research tells us that autonomy is related to intrinsic motivation, which, in turn, is related to creativity and innovation (Amabile, 1997). Another reason is that when things go fast, organizations need to be agile—and it is easier to act if you do not have to ask for permission. Finally, most organizations have a natural interest in having engaged employees, and autonomy is one part of employee engagement.

If you want an agile and innovative organization with engaged employees, you need to understand how you can best assist autonomy. This practitioner-oriented booklet will guide you along the way as you develop a tangible action plan for employee autonomy. Our ambition is not to specify a single approach applicable to all organizations but rather to provide inspiration for tailoring an approach suitable for your particular organization.

We hope you enjoy working with autonomy!

THE DEFINITION OF AUTONOMY

One cannot foster autonomy without first fully understanding what it is. Therefore, we need a definition. Based on Fairtlough (2005), Ritter, Pedersen, and Sørensen (2017), and Pedersen (2018), we can define autonomy as follows:

> **Autonomy is the local self-determination of employees, i.e., employees act independently, and they do not ask management for permission to take action or to introduce new initiatives.**

Autonomy is often equated with decentralized decision making in which lower-level employees can make decisions on their own in light of emerging developments. This does not imply that they should not be held accountable or monitored – it simply means that they are not required to ask for permission before making a decision or that they do not ask even if they are required to do so. In fact, the other side of autonomy is accountability. At least, this is the ideal situation (e.g., Fairtlough, 2005; Mankins and Garton, 2017), as illustrated below.

AUTONOMY   ACCOUNTABILITY
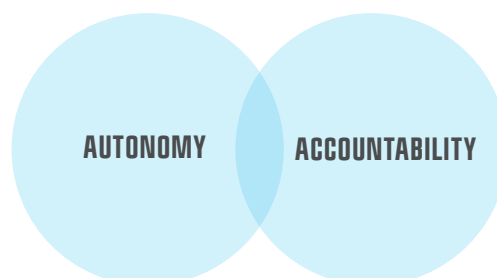
WHAT YOU NEED TO ASSIST AUTONOMY

As illustrated in the table below, there are important aspects of digitization that make it particularly relevant for work on autonomy. First, the topic of digitization takes up a great deal of time during executive and board meetings, but most digital success stories are born out of autonomous initiatives rather than C-suite efforts. Second, as touched upon in the introduction, autonomy has many benefits (e.g., agility, innovation, and engagement), but few managers have the tools needed to unleash employee autonomy and actively manage it. Third, autonomy has generally been "forgotten" by many organizations in which internal processes have been digitized and streamlined. However, being "digital" is different from being "digitized." The former is about developing digital value propositions (Ross, 2017). Therefore, being digital entails continuous adaptation and testing of externally-oriented digital value propositions. Consequently, autonomy is often crucial for testing, learning, and adapting in a quick and continuous manner. In other words, autonomy is becoming increasingly relevant and timely. The following pages will explain what is required in order to ensure your organization's success with employee autonomy.

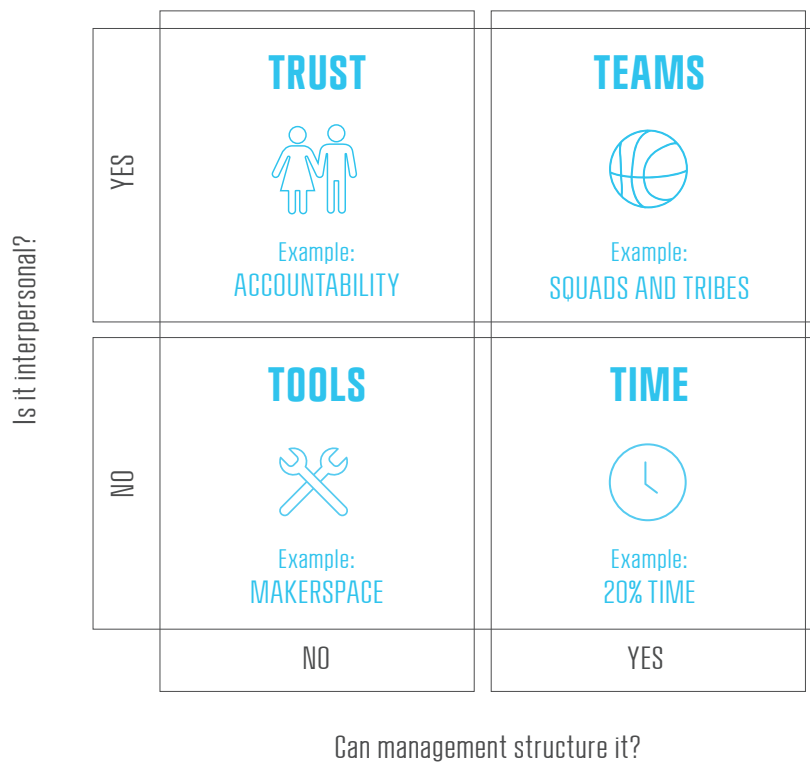|		
Digitization is a top-driven agenda ...	**Autonomy has many benefits ...**	**Autonomy has been forgotten in digitization ...**
———	———	———
... but most success stories are from autonomous initiatives!	**... but managers generally do not know how to actively manage it!**	**... but it is absolutely critical for becoming and being digital!**

It is one thing to acknowledge the importance of empowering employees (i.e., their autonomy) and quite another to foster and manage autonomy within an organization. This guide will help you in this endeavor. It is structured around the framework shown in the figure below, which presents the research-based findings of the most important elements in employee autonomy.

These elements are:
•   Teams,
•   Trust,
•   Time, and
•   Tools.

Firms that are adept at working autonomously typically convey a deep understanding of these four elements, which they actively manage. Therefore, in the following pages, I will explain each of them, offer questions you can use to analyze and assess your organization, and help you structure and prioritize the activities in which you need to engage in order excel at empowering your employees.

TRUST

Example:
ACCOUNTABILITY

TEAMS

Example:
SQUADS AND TRIBES

TOOLS

Example:
MAKERSPACE

TIME

Example:
20% TIME

Is it interpersonal?

YES

NO

NO   YES
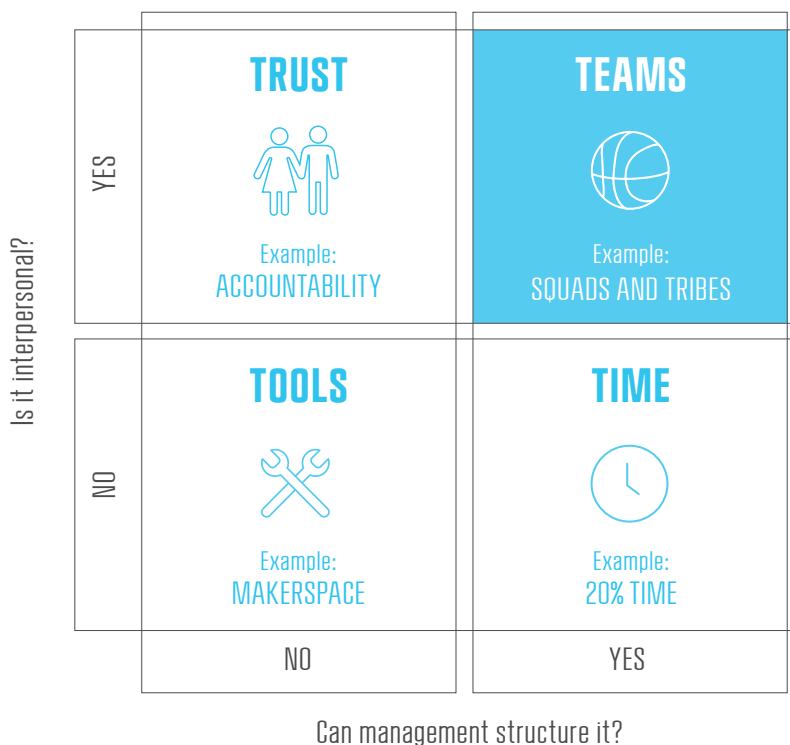
Can management structure it?

TEAMS

One important aspect of fostering employee autonomy that can be directly initiated by top management is the introduction of teamwork and a mandate to make decisions on focal projects. By structuring project work around different types of teams, managers can: (i) provide employees on teams with a mandate to make important decisions and (ii) build a local form of governance that will ensure agility. Several types of novel team structures are identified in the literature (e.g., Ancona and Bresman, 2007; Mankins and Garton, 2017)

- **X-teams** are externally oriented, adaptive teams that emphasize outreach to internal and external stakeholders;
- **Scrum teams** represent a more dynamic and flexible approach to project management; and
- **Squads and tribes**, where a squad is similar to a scrum team and is designed to be like a mini-start-up, and a tribe is a

collection of squads that work in related areas (as seen at e.g., Spotify).

Put simply, these kinds of teams essentially accelerate decision making and distribute decision-making power. If a team "owns" a particular feature of a certain product, that team has the autonomy to make relevant decisions while it is simultaneously held accountable for the end results.

On the next page, you will be asked to reflect upon: (i) the current structure of project work in your organization and (ii) the extent to which this structure is conducive to fostering employee autonomy. You will be asked to write down one thing that you believe should be retained (sustain), one thing that should not be retained (stop), and one thing you should begin doing (start).

	TRUST	TEAMS
YES	Example: ACCOUNTABILITY	Example: SQUADS AND TRIBES
NO	TOOLS	TIME
	Example: MAKERSPACE	Example: 20% TIME
	NO	YES

Is it interpersonal?

Can management structure it?

What should you **SUSTAIN** in relation to teams?

Questions: *What do you currently do that works? Can you give a few examples? How did it come about?*

What should you **STOP** doing in relation to teams?

Questions: *What do you currently do that does not work? Can you give a few examples? How did it come about?*

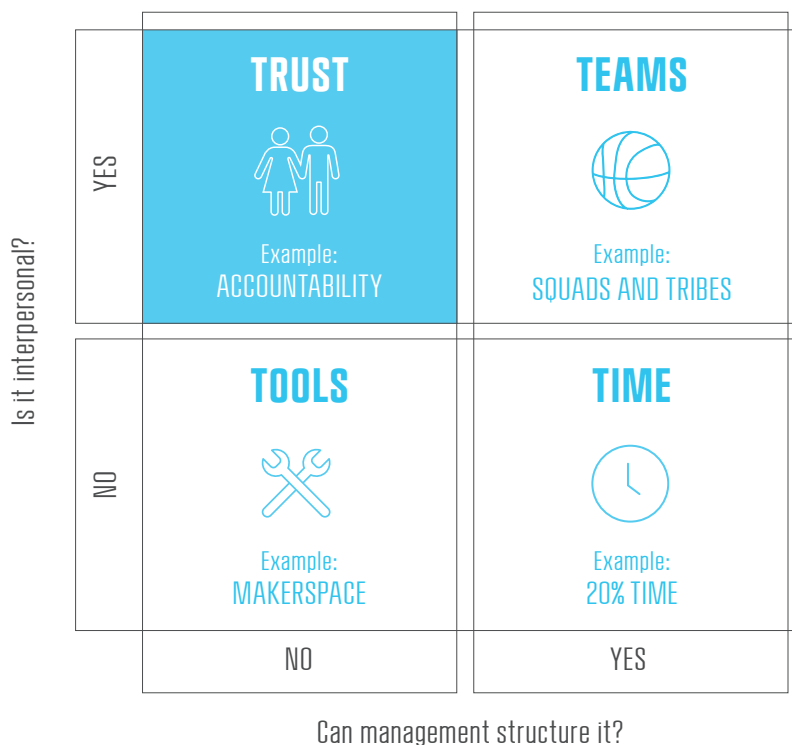# What should you **START** doing in relation to teams?

Questions: *What should you start doing in order to reach your goals in this area?*

TRUST

Autonomy cannot be initiated if there is no trust between management and employees. Trust is related to autonomy (Nys, 2016), as managers who foster autonomy signal to their employees that they trust their judgments and that they believe they will act in the best interests of the organization. Similarly, employees who accept the call to be autonomous convey not only that they trust their managers but also that they trust they will not be unnecessarily reprimanded if acting on their own leads to failure, although they will (and should) be held accountable for the outcomes of their autonomy. Managers need to trust employees, while employees need to trust each other as well as their managers. Trust involves expectations of someone (Nys, 2016). It is largely built on the basis of past experience in relation to past expectations. Therefore, if you want to convey trust, you need to show it through your actions and live up to expectations. The introduction of management control systems (which are more the rule than the exception in contemporary organizations) can be perceived as indicating a lack of trust in employees.

Do you have KPI systems or do you let your employees make decisions on their own? Do you believe your employees are responsible and accountable? Do you have an open style of communication? Does your organization tolerate failure? These questions are all related to the issue of trust.

	Is it interpersonal?	Can management structure it?	
		NO	YES
YES		**TRUST** — Example: ACCOUNTABILITY	**TEAMS** — Example: SQUADS AND TRIBES
NO		**TOOLS** — Example: MAKERSPACE	**TIME** — Example: 20% TIME

What should you **SUSTAIN** in relation to trust?

Questions: *What do you currently do that works? Can you give a few examples? How did it come about?*

What should you **STOP** doing in relation to trust?

Questions: *What do you currently do that does not work? Can you give a few examples? How did it come about?*
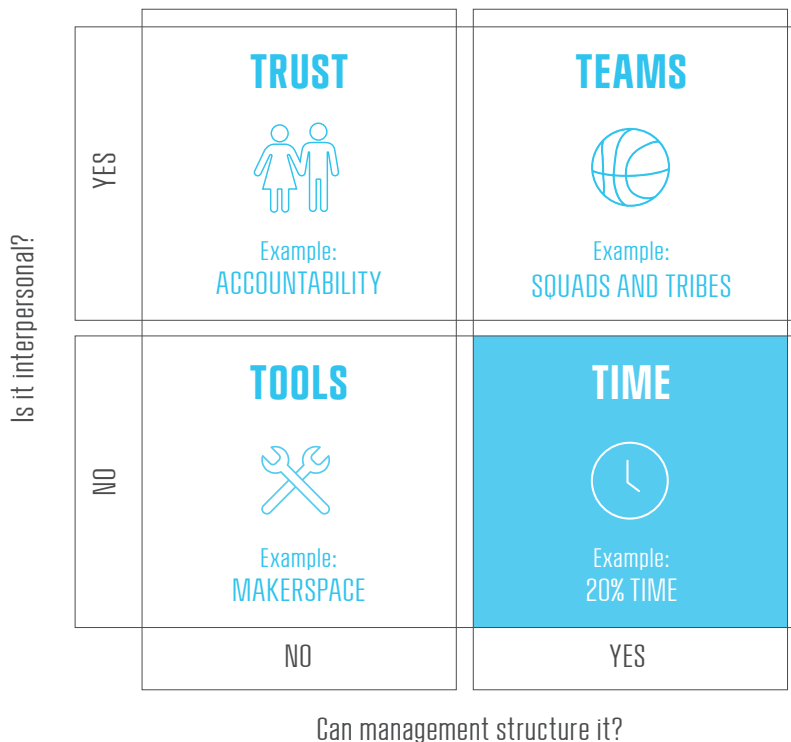
What should you **START** doing in relation to trust?

Questions: *What should you start doing in order to reach your goals in this area?*

TIME

If you merely tell your autonomous teams that you trust them and that they should make decisions on their own, will they then act on that instruction? Not necessarily. One thing that determines (and controls) the actions of employees is the amount of time they have available. For instance, if employees are busy with day-to-day operational tasks and project work, chances are that they will not have time to pursue pet projects on their own. One thing that can be done is to allocate time for employees to work on their own pet projects. Several well-known companies have successfully implemented such a system:

- Google implemented "20% time," where employees were allowed to spend 20% of their time on pet projects (Pedersen, 2019).
- Twitter introduced "hack week"– employees were given an entire week to work on a project of their choosing (Pink, 2010).
- Many organizations have 24-hour or 48-hour "hackathons" during which employees work on their own projects.

In all of these cases, employees were given time to be autonomous. Do you also provide your employees with a sufficient amount of time?

What should you **SUSTAIN** in relation to time?

Questions: *What do you currently do that works? Can you give a few examples? How did it come about?*

What should you **STOP** doing in relation to time?

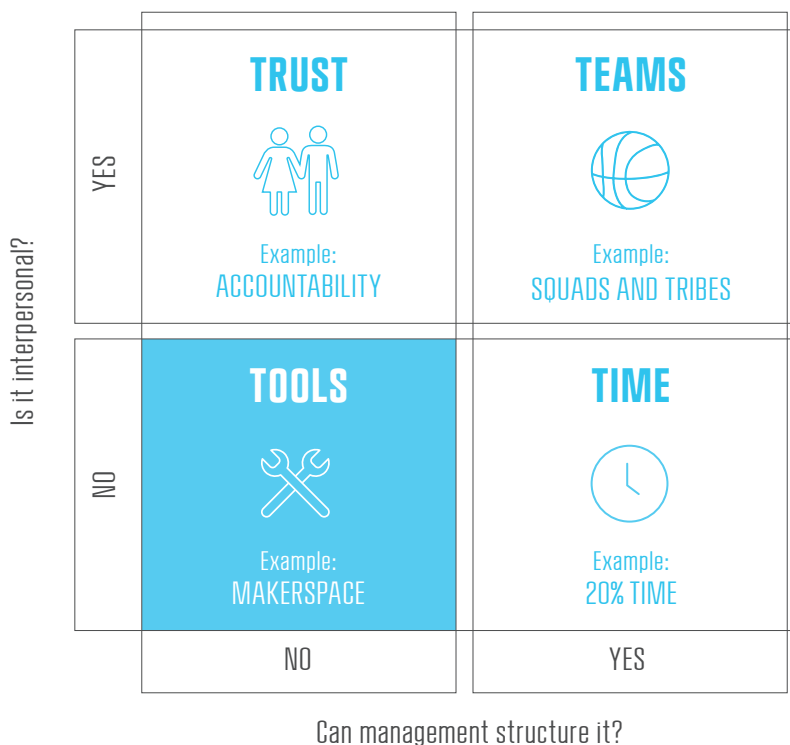*Questions:* *What do you currently do that does not work? Can you give a few examples? How did it come about?*

What should you **START** doing in relation to time?

Questions: *What should you start doing in order to reach your goals in this area?*

TOOLS

You have now structured the right teams, made sure that trust is present among management and employees, and allocated time to autonomous activities. Are these steps enough to ensure employee autonomy? Often, the answer is "no." Thus far, we have focused on whether employees have the appropriate conditions and the desire to be autonomous. However, they also need certain skills to be autonomous. For instance, employees may have great ideas for your organization's next big app, but little autonomous innovation will come about if they do not have the information, software and resources they need to develop the app. In other words, your employees need tools to help them be autonomous (von Hippel, 2001). These tools may be available in the form of "makerspaces"– collaborative work spaces in which tools such as 3D printers, laser cutters, databases, and a wide range of knowledge are made available to allow for something to be built. Moreover, a "democratization" of tools has recently taken place, so anyone can now build an app or set up a machine-learning algorithm without being able to code. An increasing number of "drag-and-drop" tools have been made available to make these opportunities approachable for a more general crowd, similar to the way in which spreadsheet programs made simple data analysis available to numerous new segments several decades ago. You will therefore need to analyze whether you are providing your employees with the tools they need to develop their envisioned solutions.

		Can management structure it?	
Is it interpersonal?	**YES**	**TRUST** Example: ACCOUNTABILITY	**TEAMS** Example: SQUADS AND TRIBES
	NO	**TOOLS** Example: MAKERSPACE	**TIME** Example: 20% TIME
		NO	YES

What should you **SUSTAIN** in relation to tools?

Questions: *What do you currently do that works? Can you give a few examples? How did it come about?*

What should you **STOP** doing in relation to tools?

Questions: *What do you currently do that does not work? Can you give a few examples? How did it come about?*

What should you **START** doing in relation to tools?

Questions: *What should you start doing in order to reach your goals in this area?*

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

We have now covered each of the four key aspects of fostering employee autonomy (i.e., teams, trust, time, and tools). For each of these, you have been asked to write down one thing you currently do that you believe should be continued, one thing that you should stop doing, and one thing that you should start doing. We can now combine these elements (sustain, stop, and start with teams, trust, time, and tools) in a matrix. The good news is that you have already written out the parts of the matrix on the preceding pages – you can therefore simply fill them in below. Thereafter, you will have an action plan for what you should sustain, what you should stop doing, and what you should start doing in order to become better at empowering your employees.

	TEAMS	TRUST	TIME	TOOLS
SUSTAIN				
STOP				
START				

If you want to further develop your action plan, I suggest two additional steps. First, specify who will be responsible for each of the action points and give them sufficient autonomy to deal with those tasks. Second, specify the resources that will be needed as well as reasonable deadlines.

Autonomy offers many benefits, but it is difficult to actively foster and manage. You now have an action plan to help guide you. With this plan in hand, you can assist autonomy, empower your employees, and reap the rewards.

Best of luck on your journey!

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