



Providing Autonomy that Works

episode 005

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Overview

As a rockstar manager, it's your job to figure out what kind of autonomy matters most to each of your direct reports, and do your best to cater to those desires while maintaining a standard of excellence in the work product or results achieved. This guide will help you successfully create autonomy for your team through reflection, discussion and experimentation.

Autonomy can manifest in the following ways:

- When you work.
- Where you work.
- What work you do.
- How you do your work.
- Who you work with.
- And more.

This guide contains the following sections for each type of autonomy:

- **Questions for reflection:**

These are intended to identify current reality and any constraints. You may answer them alone or with your team.

- **Questions for conversation:**

These are intended to open possibilities and help you better understand each person. You may have these conversations individually or as a group.

- **Structures, systems and supports:**

These are suggestions you may want to consider as part of your experiment with greater autonomy. I recommend you have further discussions to specify exactly what structures, systems and supports you will implement.

- **Potential measures of success:**

These are possible ways you will measure success of the new ways of working. Feel free to use these or create your own, as always.

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When Work Happens

● Questions for reflection

- What are your team's current practice for flexible work hours - both formal policies and informal traditions?
- Do you require people to be in the office or online during specific hours? If yes, why those hours?
- For each role on your team, are there responsibilities that necessitate a specific schedule?
- What concerns do you have about allowing people to work more flexible and personalized schedules?
- How would individuals on your team benefit from flexible working hours? Consider commute time, family care, energy level, work preferences, time zone, etc.

● Questions for conversation

Would you be interested in a more flexible work schedule?

Have you had a flexible work schedule in the past? If yes, how did you structure your time to ensure you completed all your work?

If you could work during any hours you wanted during the course of the 7-day week, what hours would those be? Why?

What concerns do you have about moving to a more flexible schedule for yourself or the team?

What support do you need from me or other team members if we were to move to a flexible work schedule?

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● Structures, systems and supports

Clarify that flexible hours does not mean less work or less oversight. Likely, it means more accountability. Establish clear expectation on work progress and outcomes to hold people accountable.

Establish how you'll track work schedule to know when people are available e.g. a shared calendar, free/busy settings in an app, etc.

Will you have set hours each day during which everyone is required to be 'online/available'? If yes, which hours?

Use online technology tools (eg: chat, video conferencing, task and project management) to support virtual communication.

Add one or two 15 minute weekly check-ins with each person to ensure they are on target with completing their work, identify any areas in which they are struggling given the flexible hours, and assess how

- it's going compared to the metrics of success.

● Potential measures of success

- Work does not slow down, or diminish in quality.
- People are able to keep work moving despite not having consistent real-time access to all team members -- We don't get stuck waiting for someone to 'get online.'
- We have not increased frustration or stress due to lack of real-time availability.
- We have sufficient overlap throughout the week to handle planned and emergent meetings.
- People are available and connected as promised.
- Our stakeholders (internal or external customers) remain satisfied with our work and availability. We don't hear any complaints from them.
- Every team member feels empowered to get things done utilizing their best time.

“Sometimes we are unnecessarily constrained by the American societal norm of 9am-5pm.”

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Where Work Happens

● Questions for reflection

What are your team's current practice for remote work - both formal policies and informal traditions?

If you request or require people to be in the office every day, why?

For each role on your team, are there responsibilities that necessitate a specific workplace?

Would you be comfortable with people working from home or a coffee shop?

How about the poolside or across the world?

What concerns do you have about allowing people to work remotely?

● Questions for conversation

- Would you be interested in a working remotely? If yes, where would you prefer to work from and how often?
- Have you worked remotely in the past? If yes, how did you manage yourself to ensure you completed all your work and stayed connected to your colleagues?
- In what environments or in which conditions do you work best in? Loud, quiet, busy, calm, in your pjs, in a suit, at a desk, on the sofa, etc.
- What concerns do you have about increasing the amount of remote work for yourself or the team?
- What support do you need from me or other team members if we increased the amount of remote work?

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● Structures, systems and supports

- Agree upon norms for when and how you will keep each other informed.
- Select appropriate technology tools or apps to communicate and/or track progress.
- Determine how often you will hold various types of meetings and if these will be done in person or remotely.
- Add one or two 15 minute weekly check-ins with each person to ensure they are on target with completing their work, identify any areas in which they are struggling given the remote work environment, and assess how it's going compared to the metrics of success.

● Potential measures of success

- Work does not slow down or diminish in quality.
- People are responsive and use communication and accountability tools to stay aligned.
- We have not increased frustration or stress due to lack of face time.
- People are available and connected as promised.
- Our stakeholders (internal or external customers) remain satisfied with our work and how to reach us. We don't hear any complaints from them.
- Every team member feels less stressed about commuting to work and still maintains healthy collaborative relationships with colleagues.

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How Work Happens

● Questions for reflection

- Are you clear about the end result and what success looks like? Do you get stuck in the weeds, describing the tasks to be done instead of the goals to be accomplished?
- Do you require people to follow particular processes or use particular tools? Why?
- Are there responsibilities, tasks or workflows that necessitate a specific process or tool? Identify those that are non-negotiable.
- What concerns do you have about focusing on strategies and goals instead of tasks and process?

● Questions for conversation

On the spectrum from not enough to too much, how do you feel about the amount of guidance or instruction I provide as your manager?

What's working or not about your current ways of working?

What ideas do you have for how you might get your work done differently that would be more efficient, effective or enjoyable while not sacrificing quality or time?

What other support do you need from me if you adopt this new approach you proposed?

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● Structures, systems and supports

- Clarify the objectives, results, goals or outcomes for the work.
- Be precise about the measures or metrics of success.
- Provide sufficient information, specific requirements and deadlines. Encourage employees to ask questions for clarification and speak up when they need help.
- Share any learnings on what's worked or not in the past to avoid recreating the wheel, but be flexible and allow each person determine how to use the learnings to direct their work.
- Communicate any change and share new information with relevant team members in a timely manner so people can adjust their goals or approaches accordingly.
- Add one or two 15 minute weekly check-ins with each person to ensure they are on target with completing their work in ways that achieve the desired goals, identify any areas in which they are struggling, and assess how it's going compared to the metrics of success.

● Potential measures of success

- Though there might be some learning curves in the beginning, work does not slow down or diminish in quality in the long run.
- We have not increased frustration or stress due to reduced guidance.
- When problems or issues arise, people are proactive in bringing them to the manager or the team to address.
- When someone gets stuck or needs help, they ask for it.
- People feel that they have the capacity and support to experiment with different ways of working to achieve results.

“Sometimes we conflate what works for us with making it easy for someone else. Whenever possible, share your learnings, but allow others to develop what works best for them.”

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What Work Happens

● Questions for reflection

- What are your current practices and habits for how work gets allocated?
- Could people have a choice in what projects they work on? Could they help determine what work needs to be done?
- Do you ever ask people to volunteer for tasks rather assigning them?
- Do you help people prioritize their work by sharing your priorities?
- Do you include people in the strategy and planning phases to allow them to give input into what work happens?
- What concerns do you have about allowing people to help determine what work they do?

● Questions for conversation

- What work do you do that you enjoy? Feel play to your strengths? Would like to do more of?
- What work do you do that you don't particularly enjoy? Struggle with? Would prefer to do less of? Or need more support?
- What competencies or skills would you like to develop or grow?
- What type of tasks/assignment would challenge you and help you develop these skills?

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● Structures, systems and supports

- Identify the context, prerequisite, performance requirement or constraints that drive the ability to opt into specific work.
- Set a norm that if an opportunity is offered, the receiver has the full ability to say no without consequence.
- Incorporate check-ins on work assignments and development goals into your one-on-ones, providing a regular opportunities throughout the year to discuss what work happens.
- Include people whenever possible in strategy conversations related to their work or role.
- Establish clear expectation on performance standards and offer support to accomplish tasks, regardless of whether it's assigned or opted-in.

● Potential measures of success

- When options for work are offered, both parties respect the independence of the receiver to decide.
- People feel they have opportunities to help shape or influence what work they do.
- When people opt into work, they deliver quality and timely results.
- When work is assigned, people continue to deliver quality and timely results. Their standing work does not diminish due to lack of choice.

“Asking gives control to the receiver, and with that, the full power to decide and decline. Telling holds control with the giver.”

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Who Work Happens With

● Questions for reflection

- What are your current practices and habits for who works together?
- Are there opportunities to shift roles or responsibilities so people can collaborate more or less with people whom have the highest synergy?
- Is your team or organization sufficiently large enough that there are a variety of people who do similar work?
- What concerns do you have about allowing people to help determine who they work with?

● Questions for conversation

Are there specific colleagues whom you feel bring out the best in you?

Are there specific colleagues whom you find yourself avoiding or unenthusiastic about working with?

What opportunities do you see to work more with those colleagues whom you have the best synergy?

What might you do to help improve your working relationships with other colleagues to move toward greater synergy?

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● Structures, systems and supports

- Identify the context or constraints that drive the ability to work with specific people.
- Establish measure of success for collaboration e.g. timely communication, respectful dialogue, task accountability, constructive debate.
- Create opportunities for team members to get to know each other's skills, roles and responsibilities, work preferences, work styles, career aspirations, etc.
- Clarify what skills and roles are needed for delivering each project or task, so when people choose whom to work with, they consider their own preferences as well as what combination contributes to the best outcomes.

● Potential measures of success

- People feel they have opportunities to work with different colleagues and learn from them.
- Collaboration among team members is improved. People are connected with more colleagues and get to learn about their strengths, work styles and skill sets.
- The diverse combination of workgroups brings out new ideas, challenges assumptions and/or deliver positive results.
- Teams find greater synergies and achieve enhanced results.

“Autonomy is at it's best when you've provided just enough structure, information and oversight to allow your team member the freedom to make any choices within those boundaries and be successful.”

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Plan for evaluation and iteration

Enabling autonomy for your direct reports takes time to design. Expect multiple iterations as you explore the most appropriate way to support each individual and the team as a whole. After you review the above sections, follow the steps below to start the experiment.

1. Decide what forms of autonomy you're open to exploring.
2. Introduce the concept of exploring new ways of working.
3. Meet with each of your team members individually to better understand what they find appealing and challenging regarding greater autonomy in their role.
4. Meet with your team collectively to identify how the team might work differently and what support each member will need from one another.
5. Agree upon particular practices to try for 2 - 6 weeks. Determine the exact timeline based on the practices selected.
6. Check with HR to ensure you are complying with any organization or legal requirements (for certain practices).
7. Reinforce that this will be an experiment.
8. Agree upon specific structures, systems and supports.
9. Agree upon specific measures of success.
10. Schedule check in meetings during or at the end of the time period, depending on what practices you've decided to try. Meet with each individual and with the whole team. During these meetings, invite feedback and offer coaching.