Want Better Employees? Then Leave Them Alone!

With a never-ending stream of new workplace fads, popular consulting programs, and self-proclaimed business gurus, it can be difficult for managers to identify what practices result in increased employee productivity. Certainly, many approaches lack any supporting scientific evidence for their effectiveness, but some techniques withstand empirical scrutiny. This article reviews one solid strategy to increase workplace productivity: increase employee autonomy.

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Autonomy: The Concept

The concept of autonomy can best be understood in the context of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a needs-based motivation theory first proposed by Deci and Ryan in 1985. In general, SDT is a highly respected theory within the scientific community and has decades of scientific support for its use in the workplace and other contexts (Deci et al., 2017). In fact, you have probably been exposed to their work if you are familiar with the terms *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* motivation.

Essentially, the theory states that all human beings have three basic psychological needs: the need to feel competent, the need to feel related to other human beings, and the need for autonomy—to feel the sense that one can freely make decisions and engage in behaviors at will.

Motivation can be envisioned as a bar that can be filled from empty to full. When the bar is low or empty, need frustration results in amotivation—a condition where individuals lack any personal desire to perform any activity and will do so if forced! Conversely, when the three needs are met and the motivation bar is full, you end up with a highly (*intrinsically*) motivated employee, who will happily engage in activities simply because they enjoy it. Individuals landing in the middle of this spectrum are *extrinsically* motivated and will engage in behaviors when they perceive an external reward (think good performance reviews and sale bonuses).

Thus, increasing an employee's sense of autonomy increases their motivation level, making them intrinsically motivated (Ryan et al., 2000). This concept is critical for management to understand since research clearly shows that increased motivation leads to improved performance (Deci et al., 2017).

Autonomy in the Workplace

In a perfect world, everyone would have a job doing what they love—need satisfaction would fill the motivation bar which in turn, would create high-performing employees. Sadly, of course, this is not reality. However, there are several easy ways to increase autonomy in the workplace.

To be clear, autonomy is not synonymous with being intrinsically motivated (Deci et al., 2017). Instead, the components of autonomy correlate with increased motivation. For instance, consider

a situation where a janitor is motivated to perform well because he consciously values working hard, though he does not inherently enjoy cleaning. While the janitor's boss is technically the one who assigned him the task of mopping the floor, the janitor view's his motivation as (somewhat) internal because he is aware that he values hard work (this is known as the *associated process for anyone keeping track*). Thus, despite lacking true intrinsic motivation, the janitor will perform his job well because his bar is modestly full from his internal thought process.

Now, contrast that janitor with a coworker who fails to connect his work performance with his self-concept. In this situation, the employee's motivation bar remains low because his motivation to work stems solely from his fear of being fired for neglecting his duties.

Thus, the filling or draining of an employee's motivation bar is open to manager influence. Individuals can change their thought processes to alter their perception of autonomy, ultimately leading to performance change.

The Role of Leaders
Leaders at all levels of an organization can encourage subordinate autonomy. Despite what the title of this article jests, increasing autonomous work motivation does not (always) entail leaving your employees alone to do as they wish. Rather, managers should show support for employee autonomy need satisfaction through "acknowledging worker perspectives, encouraging self-initiation, offering opportunities for choice and input, communicating in an informational rather than a controlling manner, and avoiding the use of rewards or sanctions to motivate behavior" (Slemp et al., 2018, p. 707).

In fact, a recent meta-analysis—a research study that uses several other studies as individual data points—found that leader autonomy support increased all three basic psychological needs in employees, which in turn strongly predicted employee well-being and work engagement, moderately predicted proactive and prosocial workplace behaviors, and was negatively related to employee distress (Slemp et al., 2018, p. 707).

Training Effectiveness
The effect of supervisor support on training effectiveness—measured by the behavioral changes presented by an employee post-training—is undisputable (Ford et al., 2018). However, the jury is still out on whether or not allowing employees to choose or to skip a training program is more beneficial to an organization overall (Gegenfurtner et al., 2016). Thus, decisions regarding employee autonomy involving training sessions should be carefully considered on an individual basis.

Still, a unique study conducted by Slemp et al. (2018) illuminates the benefits of choice in training situations. In a clever experiment, the researchers presented two groups with almost identical digital training programs and had them take a knowledge test following its conclusion. In the first group, participants were sat down and presented with a screen that told them about the content they would be studying. They then clicked the "next" button and continued onto the training. In the second group, however, the participants were presented with a choice of two training topics and could click on the topic of their choice. Here's where the trick comes in: it was a *feigned* choice, as both options lead to the same training material read by both sets of participants. The descriptions were just so vague

that they could both refer to the same reading material while seeming artificially different.

Interestingly, the results showed that the individuals who were given a feigned choice scored higher on the final test compared to their counterparts who were not given a choice, suggesting that increased autonomy increases training effectiveness.

A word of caution, however, is needed. The researchers repeated the same design with an *irrelevant feigned choice* (one group was given "a choice" of background music to play during the training instead of the training topic), and these results showed no difference between the two groups. It appears that choice options must be relevant to a work context to influence perceived levels of autonomy.

Practical Ways for Managers to Increase Employee Autonomy

- Look for opportunities to connect employee values with the actions they are performing (remember the janitor) (Deci et al., 2017)
- Communicate information in an educational manner, rather than proclaiming it to be a new company law (Slemp et al., 2018)
- Whenever possible, allow employees to choose how and when they perform tasks, so long as it is within reason (Slemp et al., 2018)
- Provide your employees with a choice of training options whenever possible (Schneider et al., 2018)
- Avoid patronizing your employees with irrelevant or fake choices. They will likely

see through the ruse, damaging your relationship (Schneider et al., 2018)

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