Changing Your Rules Of Belonging: Autonomy

The degree of autonomy that makes sense for any given team at any given time will be different depending on the context. Some teams need more, some less; some need more autonomy some of the time and less at other times; and some need more autonomy around particular issues or projects and less around others.

I often work with leaders who are frustrated that their people don't think for themselves more. It drives them crazy when their people constantly ask them for more direction. They say things to me like, 'How many times do I need to tell them what we're trying to achieve? Surely they don't expect me to tell them exactly how to achieve it as well! What am I paying them for?'. Sometimes these are the very same leaders who say, 'Why don't they ever check what they're doing with me first? I could have told them that would never work!' They usually don't recognise the inherent tension between these two statements.

Let's look at what's going on under the surface of this tension. When someone asks their boss to tell them what to do, they are protecting themselves in two ways. First, they don't need to expend a lot of time and effort figuring out what to do, which protects them from work (our brains are very good at looking for the easiest way out of every situation – it's another way it kept us alive 80,000 years ago). Second, they eliminate the risk of getting something wrong and decreasing their belonging as a result. It's much safer to wait to be told what to do. (Many might argue that it's also pretty boring, but it's definitely safer.)

As the pace of change accelerates, which is most definitely happening, the boss has less and less time available to figure out what everyone else should be doing and hand out endless directions. If the level of autonomy is too low, the boss becomes a massive bottleneck and slows everyone down. And, unless they're an expert in everyone else's jobs, they don't know enough to make good decisions anyway. This means not only is it slower to be overly reliant on the boss, it's also likely to result in far worse performance for the team and the organisation.

If the level of autonomy is too high, however, chaos is likely to ensue. If people never check anything they're doing with the boss, they will be oblivious to important context and connections with the work of others and make terrible decisions about what work to do with whom and when. The tension is in the extent to ask for permission versus forgiveness. The boss knows lots of things that the team members don't know, but the team members know lots of things that the boss

doesn't know. Getting this balance right, and constantly tweaking it as things change, is one of the most important aspects of effective teamwork.

Here's a typical example of shifting from a current to a desired rule of belonging around autonomy.

The rule we have now: We earn belonging around here by doing what the boss tells us.

The impact of this rule: The boss doesn't know as much as we do about our work and doesn't have the same skills as us. The boss doesn't have the time to think carefully about all the issues we need to address to make all the right decisions. By running everything by our boss, we often work more slowly than we could and make more bad decisions.

The problem: our strategy requires us to move faster than we are and prioritise the right work at the right time. That means we need to think more for ourselves and stop waiting to be told what to do.

The goal: To increase autonomy.

The rule we want: We earn belonging around here by figuring out what we need to do ourselves. We share our plans with the boss not to seek approval, but to get valuable input.

If you want to change the culture of your team, you have to change the rules of belonging.

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