

Managing with Tracked Autonomy for High Returns

Thinking paper by Madelyn Blair © 2000

Key Learning: This article addresses how to get the most out of every staff member and help each one grow professionally, without overburdening management. Tracked autonomy is one way for managers to constantly challenge the boundaries of “most.”

The Need

A question in every manager's mind is how to get maximum efficiency and productivity with existing staff resources. This means developing and leveraging employee's knowledge of the business. When these employees are at the lower ends of the salary structure, increases in productivity can give a high rate of return. Staff development proves crucial not only for efficiency and returns, but for job satisfaction and retention. In this economy, quality individuals want to grow all the time. They are aware that to stagnate puts their future career opportunities at risk. A manager must play to this dynamic as well, or risk losing qualified staff.

Given that ongoing staff development is of primary importance, *tracked autonomy* has been developed as a solution that minimizes management time, is form-fitted to the natural contours of human motivation, and empowers staff to contribute to growing the business.

What is Tracked Autonomy?

Tracked autonomy describes a management philosophy that encourages independent action and growth among staffers, while maintaining essential control for management. This philosophy benefits the organization by allowing staff to reach their creative and productive potential vis a vis certain tasks, thereby freeing up management time.

In the simplest form of tracked autonomy, a staff member is given a task, and is then allowed some flexibility in how that task should be accomplished. Several factors are necessary for a management style to be considered consonant with the tracked autonomy philosophy.

- the task must not be trivial — tracked autonomy works best when the task will result in some substantial contribution to a project
- initial collaboration must take place between manager and staff to determine the goals of the task and set clear expectations
- on-going feedback from the manager must occur regarding the proximity of the completed work to the goal and expectations
- staff must receive recognition for the work upon its completion
- the staff member must not be allowed to fail

The underlying principle is intuitive; human beings thrive on being able to be personally responsible for original contributions which are legitimately valuable and recognized as such. In taking a closer look at each of these points, look to see how much of your most effective management skills are already consistent with the tracked autonomy philosophy.

The Task Must Not Be Trivial

Hackman and Oldham note that “If the work being done is seen as trivial ... internal motivation is unlikely to develop—even when the person has sole responsibility for the work.” Tracked autonomy's insistence that tasks must be of value is in accord with this finding. The principle is fairly intuitive- imagine yourself in your staff's shoes. Are you not likely to respond with more enthusiasm and effort when the result of your work is some important piece of the total outcome?

An example is the task of creating the format of a final report. If the task is not a separate piece of the outcome, it must have a direct impact on the outcome; for example, designing a data collection form. This should be built into expectations at every level; it is more likely that the work will be incorporated into final reports or products, whether directly or indirectly, when the task is defined from the beginning as a part of a final product.

Initial Collaboration

The first conversation is a very important stage of the process. The collaboration between you and your staffer sets the parameters and objectives for their product. It is important to note that this communication is not an act of micro-management—it is not a time to discuss font sizes, column alignment, etc. Rather, it should be a time for you and your staffer to both grasp macro-level perspectives into the purpose and desired results of the task. In the box *Tracked Autonomy: A Success*, the manager and staff member develop the goals of the task very cooperatively and concisely. This is the only solid foundation for a tracked autonomy activity.

Why decide together? Wouldn't it save time to simply explain and assign the task? We have found to the contrary that creating objectives together results in a more effective and serviceable product every time. In the success story in the box, both Gladhill and Tolley benefited. Gladhill got an end product she could use with her report without spending unnecessary time micro-managing the task. Tolley got the satisfaction of recognition for her ability. Just as importantly, she increased her ability to successfully produce future products with confidence. In learning what “slight modifications” were necessary to satisfy Gladhill, she will probably excel with even greater efficiency on her next task.

On-going Feedback

Tracked autonomy allows your staff's creativity to improve the product because it calibrates output through ongoing feedback rather than through restrictive preliminary instructions. To ensure that your staffer does not stray too far from the

goal, it is essential that periodic conversations take place between you. Just as 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder,' so is success - what the staff member sees as fulfilling the desired goal, both in terms of format and content, you might find sorely lacking. On-going feedback keeps both of you on the same page.

The box *Tracked Autonomy: A Failure* presents a scenario where on-going feedback was not present during the task; this led to an inefficient interaction between the manager and the staffer. This case is considered a "failure" because resources were wasted to accomplish very little. In the successful case of tracked autonomy, Tolley knew early on what was expected; in the unsuccessful case, Tolley found out certain expectations only after completing the work.

The on-going feedback process can actually inspire you as the manager to revise and improve the goal. Staffers are proactive, rather than reactive participants in the process. By producing to their interpretation of what is needed, even if it is an erroneous one, they may inspire in you an idea about how else something might be done.

Mistakes, viewed from this perspective, take on a new value. And since they are usually small ones, done in the process of developing the final product in a step-wise process, few resources are expended and the risk is low.

The production and review of intermediate products will also help you to clarify what is really needed. These products act as a stimulus for examination of the initial objectives. Even if, despite careful planning, they do not convey the appropriate message, this "lesson learned" will be of use for the remainder of the project and into the next project.

On-going feedback and communication must be done in a non-accusatory way. This management style seeks to motivate staff, not belittle them. Tracked autonomy should be thought of as a joint learning and doing process, not as a monitoring activity.

Hackman and Oldham contend that if things are arranged so that the person actually doing the work cannot find out whether it is being performed well or poorly, then that person has no basis for feeling good about having done well or unhappy about doing poorly. This is why the on-going feedback element of tracked autonomy is so important. The staffer is guided by his own creativity and initiative, but the interactivity of the process provides a check with external realities. The corrective feedback is balanced with encouragement of good ideas and reinforcement of proper interpretation.

On-going feedback ideally provides on-going learning for both staff and managers. As staff gains experience, they understand what assumptions they can and cannot make, how to interpret stated objectives, and what you, the manager, mean by various terms. You yourself will learn to communicate objectives more clearly and at the level on which your staff members are working. Similarly, when you observe a staffer consistently making correct assumptions about some aspect of her work, you may take advantage of this by increasing her responsibilities.

Recognition and Success

A fourth necessary aspect of successful tracked autonomy is that the staffer should receive recognition for his work. A verbal acknowledgement says the product is valued. Sometimes, if the final product contains an acknowledgements page, the staffer's name might be included. This recognition increases the staffer's confidence and motivation, which will increase future work quality.

Perhaps nothing undermines confidence more than perceived failure. The fifth important part of the tracked autonomy management style is that you as the manager must do everything possible in to have your employees succeed. Their faith in you, their loyalty and their will to excel will all be dampened and perhaps even extinguished if their work is perceived as a failure, regardless of the reason.

But, you may ask, how can I prevent failure, any more than I can prevent mistakes? A fair, and fairly normal, perspective, but also a less responsible and hence less powerful position from which to manage! You will find that if your stand is that you will not allow your staff to fall, you will find ways to ensure success. In looking out for them, you will benefit from a higher success rate, not to mention from a team that is: more highly motivated; grateful for your dedication; and able, both because of your example and because of the safety you have created, to willingly take broad responsibility for results.

How Tracked Autonomy Motivates Employees

Hackman and Oldham (1980) found that a person takes on a "high internal work motivation" when three conditions exist: knowledge of results, experienced responsibility, and experienced meaningfulness of the work. Our successes with the tracked autonomy management style support these findings.

The 'invisible guiding hand' of the manager in this process allows for the staff member to feel she is personally responsible for the outcomes. This is in line with Hackman and Oldham's assertion that when staff views the quality of the work as being independent of external factors, such as a procedures manual, they feel, justifiably, proud.

The initial collaboration aspect of the tracked autonomy management style goes beyond Hackman, et.al. Not only does this aspect serve as a development and clarification process for the manager, it allows the staff member to feel part of the project from its inception, thus increasing that staff member's motivation and drive to excellence.

Tracked autonomy works. In one case, a staffer who joined the company with, at best, entry-level business skills was developed into a first-level professional role. The staffer credits the tracked autonomy management style with this development.

Embracing tracked autonomy can lead to increased productivity and efficiency. Through the initial collaboration session, on-going feedback, and staff recognition

aspects of the management style and by practicing the responsibilities listed in the box Tracked Autonomy: A "How-To" for Managers, creative production efficiencies are increased and organizational excellence is achieved.

The following quote comes from an employee managed under the tracked autonomy philosophy.

Some people give you something you've never done before that's not even in your field just because they don't want to deal with it, and then when you come back with something they say, 'That's not what I wanted.' Other people are always looking over your shoulder and would have saved time by just doing it themselves. My manager never did that.

This quote demonstrates how resources are lost both in micromanagement and in neglecting to give ongoing feedback in a stepwise fashion. Tracked autonomy requires that you gauge your staffers' abilities and look for ways to add value for them through expanding those abilities. This same employee continues:

Things that were more complicated, she would give a task as a stepping stone and then say use that and do this with it, all the way through until we had a complete product.

As you reflect on your own management style, you may find that different elements of tracked autonomy can also be added into the mix step by step, as you stretch your ability to gauge your staffers' abilities and provide the kind of appreciative and collaborative communication that generates high quality results.