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# SELF STEERING

OF AUTONOMOUS TEAMS



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## **Self steering of autonomous teams**

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To start with, we can roughly define these words as follows:

- **Team** = A group of people with a common goal, working together in work processes.
- **Autonomous Teams** = A team that has no need to have someone to command it.
- **Steering** = Conducting people so that you make sure that the goals are reached.
- **Self-steering** = No need for someone from outside; the group itself takes care to reach the goals.

Many Owner, CEO, Manager dreams of this: a company where the people and teams by themselves do the work processes adequately and reach results, without the need of someone from outside to command and control. Can this dream come true?

In this article we will reflect on the principles and conditions that are important if we want to create and develop Self steering of autonomous teams.

Not so long ago, the main challenge for companies to differentiate themselves from their competitors was to be highly efficient in productivity, quality and cost management. However nowadays these aspects (costs, productivity and quality) are a “must” and no longer differentiate them from others. Also, technology and systems have become a common need to be developed, if you want to maintain yourself in the game.

Nowadays there the critical point to differentiate is related to the question of continuous improvement and change, not only in the strategic realm, but also in the operational level. In the latter there is an enormous potential to improvements present in the people that do the daily tasks and work processes. The question is: how can you bring this potential to transform in change and improvements. How can you build an environment and make the conditions in which creativity is optimised?

Our thesis is: creativity is most easily achieved in conditions where the co-worker and colleague can

- Experience the sense of what he is doing in relation to the higher purpose of the company;
- See the relation between his work and his immediate and final client;
- Be directly connected to the goals of the organization and his department;
- Take personal responsibility for the results of what he is doing
- Have a free space to work, to improve work processes and to develop himself;
- Realize himself as a professional and as a human being.

In short: An environment where he is connected to the impulse of the company, to the colleagues he works with and to the needs of clients, so that he can say: “This is my company” “This is my team”, “This is my client”, “This is my business” and “Here I can realize myself as professional and as human being”

This way of seeing is not new: Abraham Maslov already indicated that the deepest need and the highest satisfaction of a human being is reached when he comes to “self-realization”; when he works out of inner motivation. This makes him free to be creative.

Again, this seems utopian and very far from the reality we meet in our daily lives. The question is: is it possible to come somehow near this in our organizations? How can we foster this environment and conditions in a company, with real interest and transparency, in an honest relation with the co-workers.

In order to come to an excellent product or service, it is not enough for our co-worker to be capable: to have the professional knowledge and experience. A second element is as important as the first one: he also

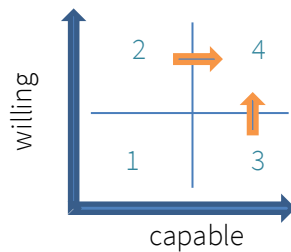
has to be willing to do the job and to work. Full maturity is reached when the two are present.

Two conditions for co-worker to work efficiently:

1 – To be capable to do what he is supposed to do = Knowledge and experience

2 – To be willing/wanting to do his work. This demands a source of inner motivation:

“I do it, because I want to do it!”



The two conditions together show full maturity of the person.

1 = Not willing, not capable: → shouldn't be here!!!

2 = Willing, but not capable → should be potentially capable and be trained

3 = Capable, but not willing → should be delegated and trusted

4 = Willing and Capable → full maturity

But what makes a person to engage fully in his work. Basically, we can distinguish two sources:

1. An external source: I do it, because I expect to gain an advantage (an award), or because I want to avoid a disadvantage (a punishment). This happens if and as long the source is there.
2. An internal source: I do it, because this means realizing something that is important to me, or to overcome a challenge that I have taken personally. This happens if and as long as I am “in the game”.

So, if we can create circumstances by which people enter and stay “in the game”, we release an enormous strength for creativity, with positive effect on the efficiency of the organization and also brings about the realization of the co-worker as human being and consequently his well-being as a human person.

**So here we touch the meeting-point of both excellent financial results for the organization and excellent human results for the people involved.**

Every person in principle has the wish to take on responsibility. Not just for the department, for the team, for the process, but also responsibility for results.

In a company ± 90% of the co-workers belong to the operational level and the daily results depend on them, on their action. Traditionally, a company is structured hierarchically and each group of operational co-workers has someone who is responsible for them. This person, the boss or supervisor, plans the activities, sets the targets (or receives these from the higher level), distributes the work, orients the people, controls them on quality, productivity, intervenes when he thinks it is necessary, etc. He is the person who reports to his manager and accounts for the results of the co-workers. The co-workers just do what they are told to do.

This image may seem a little exaggerated, but in a traditional company this is the underlying steering principle. The result is that the co-workers limit themselves to this: they just do what they are told to do. Eventually this is boring and does not satisfy a human being; this does not appeal to inner motivation and motivation is restricted to external factors, like a good salary, bonus, promises to be promoted, or avoiding to be punished or to be fired. The supervisor learns to apply tools to motivate or learns to create pressure to reach the targets. In general, he himself is also under pressure from the top. The result is a lot of stress, and this leads ultimately to suffering, to diseases and to depression or burn out.

Absenteeism is growing, people are leaving and the work environment is poisoned.

But it is not only this state of work environment that causes losses to co-workers and to the company. There is another loss, may be even more expressive: in this situation the co-worker will not be able to come to full expression of this potential as professional and as a person. This is an enormous source of happiness and self-fulfilment for each person. And curiously this is also an enormous source of creativity and for the company to come to full realization of its mission and its goals.

What happens if the operational level is given the possibility to work in “Self-Management Units”: that means when each unit or group of co-workers takes care of their own work processes, plan their own activities, divide the work between themselves, control their own critical indicators like productivity and quality, detect their daily problems and solve what is within their reach, improve their own work processes, take responsibility for their own results?

If we can do this, we treat the co-workers really as human beings, capable and willing to take on responsibility and as persons we can trust by delegating this to them. Of course, this needs a specific structure and procedure.

The result is that the SMU takes over almost 80% of the task that was done by the supervisor. He now can take on another and more important role. He is now free to focus on creating the necessary conditions for the SMU work autonomously and on things like improving products and connection with clients and areas of the company.

Summarizing:

Success depends on

- Discipline to control costs, produce quality and reach productivity
- Capacity to change and adapt constantly, in other words: creativity

The first aspect was an important factor that differentiated a company, but it is now a must. If you don't have a high standard of quality, productivity and costs, you are out!

The second aspect is getting more and more important as the element that really makes the difference.

Capacity to change and adapt depends on the creativity of co-workers and this depends on the structure where they can be free to work (aligned to the overall goals). The SMU structure provides this space and is able to create change as continuous improvements in the work processes. We will present a case to show how this can work in practice.

Working with SMU requires a special quality of leadership. We call this Horizontal Leadership. Leadership that is focussed on the development of people who can act autonomously in their situation and responsibility.

Four qualities characterize Horizontal Leadership:

1. Steering = in such a way that the co-workers take care and improve their own work processes
2. Coaching = in such a way that they constantly take responsibility for their learning and developing abilities and skills related to their function and role.
3. Inspiring = in such a way that they see and feel the sense of what they are doing in relation to the client and the impulse of the company.
4. Intervening = in dialogue and in the perspective of what is adequate and necessary in the situation for the company and for the person.