

2022 ANNUAL CONFERENCE
JUNE 6-9, 2022
NEW ORLEANS > HYBRID



Encouraging Autonomy & Empowering R&D Teams

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The Problem

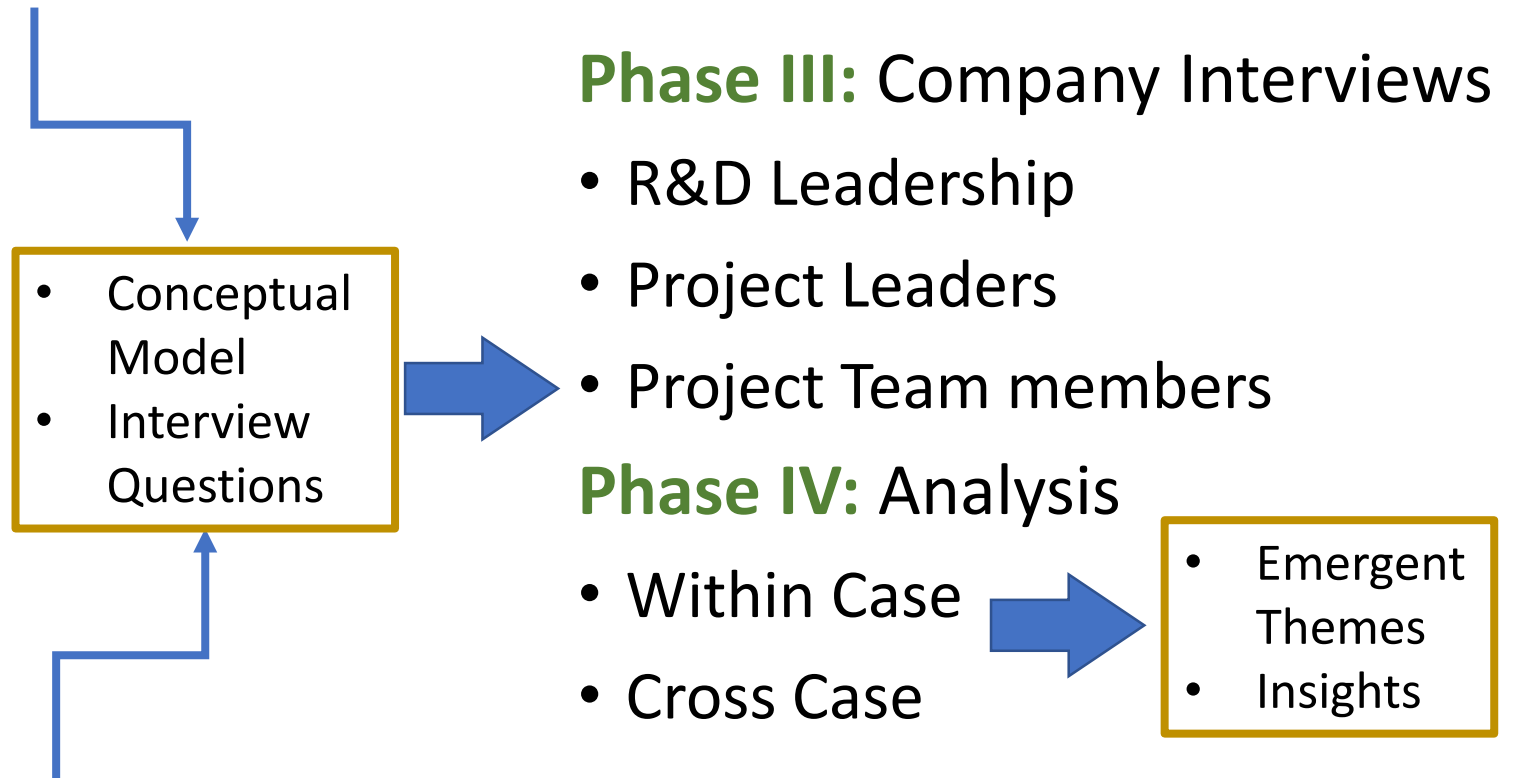
- R&D's job is to create new opportunities through discovery and invention, and solve urgent technical crises.
- R&D has become an 'order taker,' at the expense of initiating new innovations.
- Constant flux, uncertainty in companies (re-orgs, mergers, activist investors) create distractions and limit confidence of R&D to take initiative.
- CTO's frustrated. Reduced influence among Corporate Leadership team.

What holds R&D teams back from feeling empowered to act on their own?

Process

Phase I: IRI project team lengthy discussions to uncover experiences, challenges, real life examples.

Phase II: Literature Review.



Participants

Phase I: Informal Discussions

- Diageo
- Smuckers
- Omnova, Synthomer
- Hershey's
- Goodyear

Bi-weekly for one year

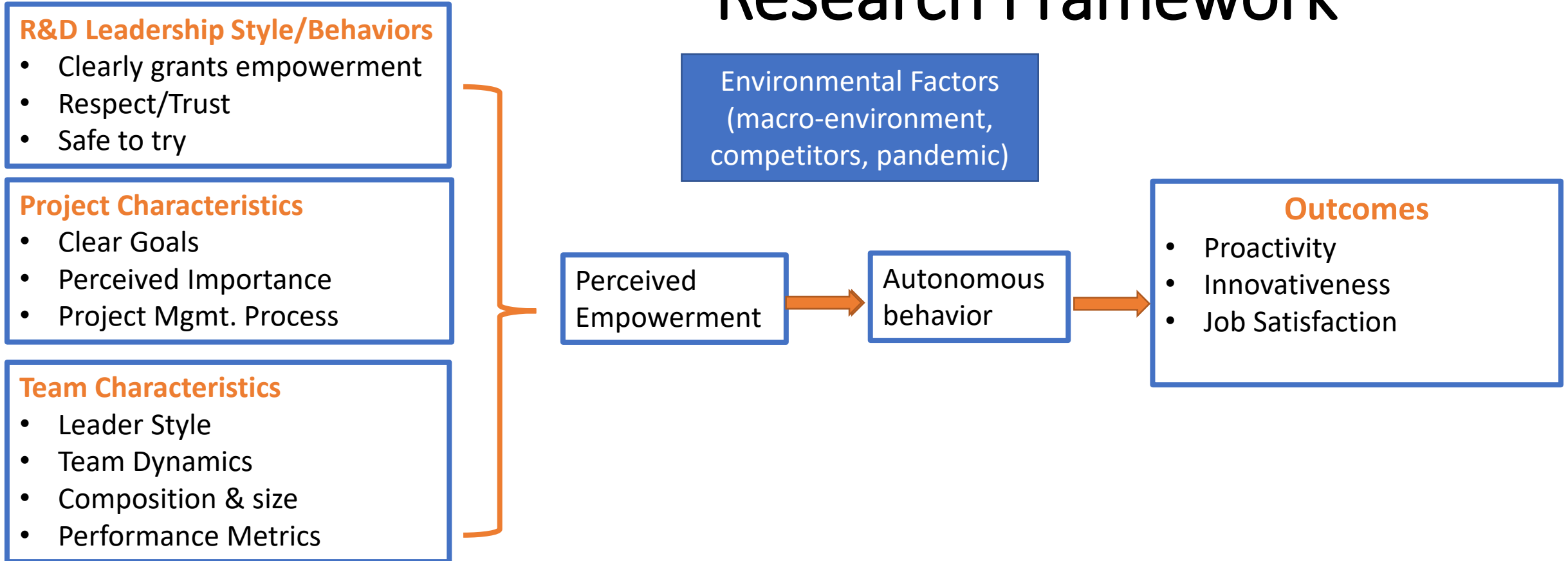
Phase III: Formal Interviews

- WL Gore
 - Novozymes
 - Mosaic
 - Axalta
 - Kimberly Clark
- 1-2 Sr. R&D Leaders
 - 1-3 Project/ Team Leaders
 - 2-8 Project/ Team members



38 interviews

Two Contrasting examples



Research Framework



Definitions

- Empowerment: Granting of power or authority to perform various acts or duties.¹
 -  Authority over *What we do/problems we address/projects we undertake.*
- Autonomy: The quality or state of being self governing or self directing.²
 -  Authority over *How we do it/approaches we use to accomplish the objective.*

Definitions

- Empowerment: Granting of power or authority to perform various acts or duties.¹
 -  Authority over *What we do/problems we address/projects we undertake.*
 - **Granted empowerment vs. Perceived empowerment**
- Autonomy: The quality or state of being self governing or self directing.²
 -  Authority over *How we do it/approaches we use to accomplish the objective.*

Contexts

		How to Achieve the Objectives (Autonomy)	
		We decide	Others decide
Setting Objectives (Empowerment)	We decide	High empowerment & High autonomy (exploratory research)	High empowerment & Low autonomy (micromanaged)
	Others decide	Low empowerment & High autonomy (respected order takers)	Low empowerment & Low autonomy (disrespected order takers)

Contexts

		How to Achieve the Objectives (Autonomy)	
		We decide	Others decide
Setting Objectives (Empowerment)	We decide	High empowerment & High autonomy (empowered)	High empowerment & Low autonomy (micromanaged)
	Others decide	Moderate empowerment & High autonomy (disrespected order takers)	Low empowerment & Low autonomy (disrespected order takers)

Moderate empowerment: Seat at the Table/Beginning to End/Wide angle lens on the problem/Alignment on goals

Contexts

		How to Achieve the Objectives (Autonomy)	
		We decide	Others decide
Setting Objectives (Empowerment)	We decide	High empowerment & High autonomy (exploratory research)	High empowerment & Low autonomy (micromanaged)
	Others decide	Low empowerment & Low autonomy (rule-takers)	Low empowerment & Low autonomy (rule-breakers)

Moderate autonomy:
 Cowboys/rule-breakers create chaos. Check-ins important.

Influencers

- Senior Leaders
- Project Characteristics
- Team Leaders
- Team Characteristics

Senior Leader Influences on Empowerment & Autonomy

Encouraging	Dampening
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clarify H3 agenda, protect from BU involvement early on. Ensure business partnership/engagement otherwise.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Erratic decision making. “Surprise disruptions, unexpected curve balls, changes in direction/objectives”
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Make sure Project Leaders have seat at the table to fully understand the problem/opportunity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hierarchical distance/rushed process results in inadequate attention given to listening to/working ideas.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Display trust and confidence in direct reports.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Allow others to scope the problem at the outset. (more later)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Proactively enable internal networking as a resource.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unwieldy governance structure, too much reporting required, inflexibility in process.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop Team/project leaders, Mentor/coach	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Overly involved in project execution
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Replace ineffective project leaders, even if they have great technical skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Allow vagueness on who has authority to make various decisions. “Anyone can pull the fire alarm”
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hire/Select/evaluate people on willingness to shoulder accountability for outcomes rather than task completion. “With empowerment comes responsibility”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Too laissez-faire on coaching/developing team leaders. Neglect collecting data on team dynamics to use for coaching.

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Make sure Project Leaders Involved in Project Scoping

- B described her ‘unempowered’ project as a ‘defensive’ move to prevent a customer from moving to a competitor. The business determined the approach, and directed R&D to follow. *I would say, there was already an approach put in place in a way even upon getting it assigned.* They did win that immediate business after scrambling in a short window of time and came up with a competitive technology, but in the end they lost the customer. So, the project was a success but not the long term objective. When asked what could have been done differently she said *Focus on the full system* not just on trying to fulfill a narrowly scoped request. *There was our (immediate objective) but then there was what we were trying to defend and maybe bridging that together a little bit might have been a better way to do it in the long run.*
- *Bring in those team members a little earlier in the project. Understand the longer term effects of what their projects means for operations...and for future customers. Ideally, having that stakeholder group come in earlier with the kind of democratic leadership style where people could speak freely for new ideas to be generated.*

The big picture allows for innovation bc innovation crosses boundaries of a project’s phases and silos. If specs are too narrow or defined by others, missed opportunities to innovate in a meaningful way.

Trust

- *My leaders believed in me, believed in what I was doing. So they were already saying, 'we believe in your capacity. And we know that if you decide to go with a project, you're not going to screw it up. And if you screwed up it is not because you were not careful, but because you learn,' et cetera. So they didn't consider that my time investigating this idea was a waste of money and time. So I have leaders that supported me.*
- *To pull all of this off it really would be thanks to (Supervisor name). (She allowed me) to just run with it and see what I could find. So it really boils down to her trusting me.*

Proactively enable networking as a resource for learning

- *If I determined that I didn't know about something, I was able and willing to grasp for help outside the team that had more knowledge, and that was encouraged as well. **So we weren't conscientious about our own limitations and we were able to supplement them.** (Team member)*
- *(Our head of R&D) has done away with silos. We still have our techs, engineers, supervisors, managers, but there's more interaction between us. There's more freedom. Some of our engineers will ask for advice or improvements. (He) saw this structural hierarchy and knocked it down. (Team member)*
- *We **cross-functionalize.** (Team member)*

Proactively enable networking to **check understanding of the context**

- *From an empowerment perspective, ..people who have a lot more connections through the organization..might feel more empowered because they can learn about the context and maybe have a chance to influence it given scientists to scientists. Versus in some other parts of our organization, it might feel more like a directive, more being told what to do rather than feel like I have part in this solution. [All projects face]the same constraints, whether its from a budget perspective, from a management perspective, from an organizational perspective, imposed across our organization. And yet the people who feel less empowered, are the ones who don't have all those connections. Context really helps you understand and maybe appreciate why what is being done is done.... Because in reality, none of us have complete control but [if] we can understand constraints and are able to factor them out, we think... "Okay, given all those constraints, I'm able to do my job" but if you don't have that context of constraints, it might just feel like, "Hey I'm not being allowed to do the job the way I want to do it." (Sr Leader)*
- *We're not stuck on an island. (Team member)*

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[**RESET** FUTURE
FOCUS]

Developing Project Team Leaders

The value of coaching team leaders

*One thing [our company] has been working on over the last year, maybe because of the pandemic: is **training leaders on coaching skills**, to coach and ask the right questions, open ended questions, to empower the team, to take their own ideas and build on them. This has helped me a lot, to learn and have this the close coaching. **We had professional coaches listening and giving us feedback multiple times during the year**, and now I can apply this into my our team's conversation.*

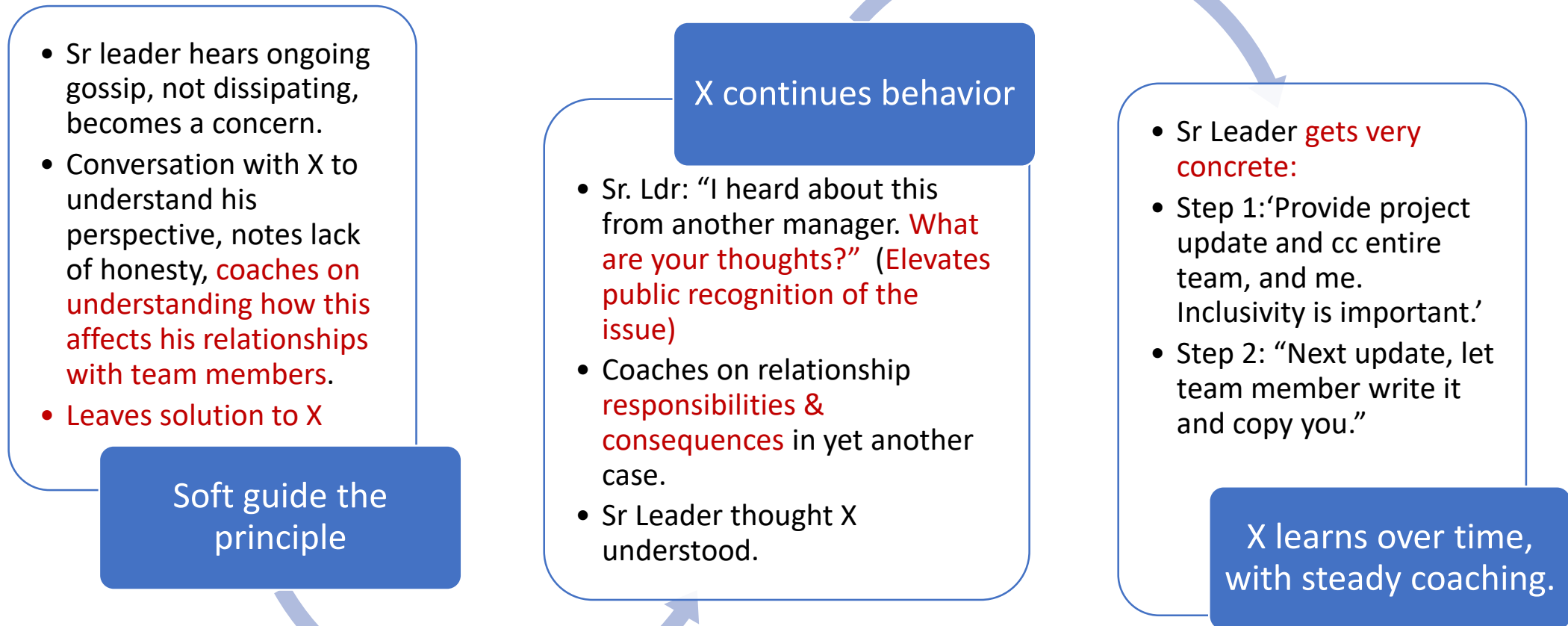
[I find that my team is more willing] to take risks, because we keep talking about failing fast, whereas before there was the fear of failing. I've been listening, hearing more from my team, saying, okay, let's try, let's do this, let's break this into those different modules and tasks. And if one fails, we can move to the next, and you start seeing this change of... not being afraid of failing.

I came from a production background, and was used to moving to a solution, giving them the answer before they could come up with it by themselves. So this coaching helps. It's just the practice of doing it, but it does create a big difference.

What it takes

So I have a pretty stable team right now. Before, when we were going through a lot of changes in the company and we were replacing leaders, I would say 90-95% of my time was on the culture and the team environment, so making sure that you spend time getting rid of anxieties, dealing with their problems, and just making sure that you have a relationship with them, so 90%. Head of R&D

Example Problem



Project Leader Development highly variable across companies Zero investment example

And so we do have a training course for a new project managers. A lot of it focuses on the process that [our company] uses and a little bit less on the leadership side. So, there's one module that talks about forming your team, but then we usually don't get to choose our team. So, we are trained in picking people that work well together and having all the different skills you need in the project, but then ...someone else chooses that.

Project Leader Development – Good intentions example, but Stalling hurts

This manager comes with lots of experience, and with that experience, he also has lots of opinions. I believe he hasn't set up an empowering type of environment and what we've missed in that environment was more on the people side than actually on the results side.

I have gotten feedback that he would be quick to jump in to offer an opinion without really fully letting the team think about 'What is the next step?' So there's something there around the engagement of the team member... [rather than] 'I'm known for being this expert in this area,' because it's kind of stealing that limelight.

But I would say on the results, can I compare to what we're missing– in that case. Not yet because it's really only been recently that we focused on this part of leadership development for this particular person.

Project Leader Development -- Minimal investment

*I think people sometimes think this is fluff, but it's truly.... The other people in the team were from Europe so we asked them to come here. Then we worked through the attributes of the project, we did some team building exercises just to get to know each other, and then during that visit was when we did some brainstorming so that after that, **what I was encouraging them to do is to have much more regular and frequent touchpoints.** The project leader, who was one of my team managers had weekly calls with the full team but also had personal calls one on one with this person in Europe who's part of the team but who's not part of [R&D], who's with the business team. **So, it was encouraging that type of interpersonal network and relationship that I think helped quite a lot** because I would tell you that the first part, of course, you don't immediately become friends just because you went to an escape room which is what we did together.*

Project Leader Development -- Heavy investment example

*The key is to have the bandwidth. The number-one thing I've taught my leaders that report to me are, when you come in the morning, if you're spending the first hour doing emails by yourself, then you're doing the wrong thing. **Your first hour should be making sure your team gets their questions answered for the day and listening to their needs.** Then you have the rest of the day. The thing that you've got to realize is, **if you enable people** and show them the answers early on, then you will have the rest of the day free. But if you don't show them that time, then the rest of the day will be filled giving them the rest of the time, so it's a snowball effect.*

Be willing to replace ineffective project leaders

- *If you have a weak project leader, it's going to be really hard for me to believe that that project can continue to keep on track.*
- *I move team managers around just because I think it also keeps them on their toes and gives them an opportunity to learn some other technology. But at the same time, in one case, for example, one of my teams was struggling, so I moved one of my, I guess, more technically seasoned team managers into the group, and then exchanged people around. I think it has certainly done some good for the team. ...[They're not necessarily the subject matter experts, so they're kind of fungible. They're good at managing projects or a portfolio of projects.] My thought was from a modeling behavior standpoint that that might help. The other thing is just a different dynamic. Just putting somebody in there would create a different dynamic in the team.*
- One Sr R&D leader reported having to ask up to 10% of his people to leave when they did not respond to coaching and could not align with the organization's culture.

Hire/Select/evaluate people on willingness to shoulder responsibility for outcomes rather than task completion

- *Some people have an easier time embracing empowerment, coming up with suggestions and then going for them whereas **other people can feel a little uncomfortable with having an increased amount of responsibility** and actually coming up with suggestions because they were used to being told what to do and they liked that better because then they don't have any responsibility.*
- ***One thing that's interesting to consider for empowerment, is if they want it or not.** There are people that if you empower them, give them autonomy, they don't want it...they work from 8-5, then close down, They go home without even thinking about what they left behind. **When you give empowerment, you also give them responsibility.** And you may be adding this extra thing to their life that they don't want. So for this type of position [compared with production], **I screen for people that are not afraid, they want to take ownership.** With this pandemic, we saw that, for these type of positions, this is even more important because we are not in the office, so we need to be able to trust and delegate.*

Too laissez-faire on coaching/developing team leaders.
Neglect collecting data on team dynamics to use for coaching.

*And you also have the conversations of, "This is how I would do it. Let's try different mechanisms to maybe get you the trust back and build the trust for the next project." So then the same thing happens, and a lot of times you don't see it in front of you. But if you're not a good leader that follows up and becomes a little curious on the follow up, you'll never know. **In a hierarchy organization, if I only talk to my next direct reports on how their people are succeeding, I only get their opinion. But you've got to build perspective of opinion, and so you do lots of follow up. Then you go to the next level.***

Vague Decision Authority

The RACI model – Who is responsible? Who is accountable? People knowing what they are supposed to be doing..That's one big thing. I think the right level of decision making is important for teams to feel empowered. If they always have to ask for permission to do something, then it slows everything down and then they don't feel empowered, or if they make a decision and maybe somebody thinks it's the wrong decision and they get penalized for it without the ability to say, or to correct it, then that's a problem too.

Project Characteristics' Influences on Empowerment/Autonomy

Encouraging	Dampening	Not particularly important
Clear objectives		
Importance to the Business/Alignment		
	Commercialization Stage	
		Project Management Process used
	Team called in after project initiation as SME's	

- Projects in late stage are naturally more limited regarding flexibility.
- Lack authority to drive direction or prioritization; team relationships already formed.

- Type of project management process (E.g. Stage-Gate, Agile) does not seem to influence A&E,
 - BUT *ability to exercise flexibility* within a process does. **Agile stages.**
 - Interference with a process, particularly from leadership, is a clear detractor.

Clear Objectives

- *I think the success criteria, the innovation brief, whatever you want to call it was too squishy. It wasn't clear, it was vague. And vagueness doesn't empower a team at all...**Innovation objectives have to be clear at outset and un-muddled by scope changes.***
- *In any project where the targets are very well defined and you know what you need to do, you might not know which levers you're going to need to get there, but you know what your objective is, **those typically tend to be very empowered teams.** They know what they're trying to get to and if you have the **right level of experience behind it**, those work smoothly.**When you have a project where the objectives are not very clear or they keep changing, it doesn't matter how much of an experienced team you have behind it. You will likely not succeed. And it would lead to a point where the technical person in charge will start to lose interest. They will become frustrated and they will no longer be empowered to make decisions, because what's the point? This is going to change.**"*

Importance to the Business/Alignment

- *I need someone in the business unit to be an advocate for this and be as excited about it as me. And when there's bumps along the way that they're willing to stand up and not just bail. Sr. Leader*
- *People want to work on high visibility/high impact projects rather than those that might be important but firefighting or short term. Sr. Leader*
- Note: Can be important to the company but not necessarily to a singular business, i.e. aligned with a strategic objective ('Strategic projects', H3's) rather than an immediate business objective.
 - ✓ Case of one project ongoing for 7 years, finally solved through an empowered individual.

Team Leader Influences on Empowerment/Autonomy

Encouraging	Dampening
1. Set expectations that team members will offer ideas. Facilitate brainstorming.	1. Give answers.
2. Ask questions that provoke team members to figure things out.	2. Tell team members what to do without asking for input.
3. Listen to suggestions.	3. Talk all of the time.
4. Be clear on the next steps. Give team members the mandate to act on a suggested approach, own it.	4. Allow team members to flail around.
5. Push back on behalf of the project...Assumes enough relevant technical and business impact understanding.	5. Assume every suggestion from leadership is a directive, re-set the course with each incoming suggestion.
6. Step outside of process as needed.	6. Manage to the process rather than the desired outcome.
7. Ensure team members expertise/fit with role of task. Role fit and Role clarity build confidence.	7. Expect team members to engage with customer or other market agents when they're not motivated/trained to do so.

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4. Be clear on the next steps. Give team members the mandate to act on a suggested approach, own it.	4. Allow team members to flail around.
5. Push back on behalf of the project...Assumes enough relevant technical and business impact understanding.	5. Lack of preparedness/technical competence/business understanding.
6. Step outside of process as needed.	6. Manage to the process rather than the desired outcome.
7. Ensure team members expertise/fit with role of task. Role fit and Role clarity build confidence.	7. Expect team members to engage with customer or other market agents when they're not motivated/trained to do so.

Set Expectations for taking initiative, Facilitate Brainstorming

*Our operating philosophy is identify needs from the business unit, and then have a healthy competition of ideas to come up with solutions to those needs. So we try to make the needs more visible across the entire department and **we regularly have idea-sharing, or problem solving, or even idea in-sessions for tackling specific problems.** The best set of ideas get pursued. Now given that we already have projects implied, we have certain people with certain skills and everything else, it gets filtered out. But what we **try to do is to give everybody a chance to bring their creative side to problem solving, that is of importance to the company.***

- People like to participate bc they want to know what's going on in the BU's even if their plate is too full to work on the projects.
- R&D budget is 70/30 immediate business/exploratory, changes year to year, but **scientists are asked to present exploratory ideas to the department, get funding and eventually can get BU support.** *So that's another way we try to get the fingerprint of the scientist into the portfolio.*

Be Clear on Next Steps, vs Let team members flail around

The problem with this (leader) was he couldn't communicate his goals and vision. You'd go off and if you didn't meet his vision, he would blow his top and throw you under the bus in front of the vice president...He was very difficult to work with because he says "I can't tell you what I like. I just know if I don't like it." It was infuriating. He'd give you empowerment until the time where you produced and he liked it or he didn't . No feedback, just "Go back and do it again."

Articulation is difficult work. Check in regularly, ask questions, learn from team member experiences, redirect together.

Push back on behalf of the project

*I've been at this company for several years, but in a different part of the business. Now, moving on to this .. setting is a little bit different. The [technology is not very different]... but the business works very differently. **And it took me a few months to get up to speed, to really understand and have that ground underneath me well cemented. And it wasn't until then that I began to feel that greater empowerment and that I was able to say to upper management, "No, perhaps that's not what we are going to do. What we need to do has to be a little bit different. And by the way, here's the data that proves that that's what we need to do."** But it isn't until you gain that level of comfort that you can begin to make a stronger case for your development.*

Need to know enough and feel confident enough to determine next steps and justify.

Project Management vs Project Leadership

*So, the biggest difference in leadership from the two managers I've worked with [on these projects] is that the **first didn't listen to any of the feedback from the team. He was just trying to .. check off all the boxes.** And so if somebody said, well, we can't check off this box, it was 'well we have to, so, let's do it. Let's check it off.' Versus the **second one** who was more willing to step outside the process, and actually have a separate meeting to figure out what we could do....**More of a problem solving mentality than a check the boxes mentality.***

*I think the team was a lot happier with the project manager that was willing to listen and **it probably ended up having more work for us, but at least for me, it was fine. I didn't mind that we had extra meetings because I felt like it was going to be a better end point.***

Consequences: For Project 1, what happened is that the issues had to be solved by somebody else after the launch.

Team Characteristics Associated with Empowerment/Autonomy

Theme	Observations
Team selection/ composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resource Fluidity: Do we have the people we need or the people who are available? People we need positively affects confidence and therefore empowerment. Some people more interested in a 9-5 job than being empowered. Victim mentality or overly compliant.
Team continuity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With continuity, team members know and trust one another, have shared experiences, builds confidence. Can be empowering, but can become cowboys, so need guidelines. Fresh teams...shown to have greater originality and multidisciplinary impact¹
Team size	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small teams are nimble, but larger teams viewed by members as richer in knowledge resources.
Team dynamics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ego among team members affects dynamics vs. More seasoned team members viewed as resources by younger members. Interpersonal and professional respect is key. (Intervention in one team)
Project kickoff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not mentioned much. Investing in this might help with goal clarity, role clarity, team dynamics.
Metrics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Closer to commercialization, project metrics were clear & measurable. Otherwise, interim goals more important. Individual performance metrics appear weakly connected to project progress.

Overly compliant Team members

[Our] managers are good researchers. This one was a very curious individual, so he had a lot of questions. He would send me stuff like, "Hey, what about that?" I might look at that and go, "That's kind of stupid." I would just ignore it or I might look at it and think, "It's actually not a bad idea," because the guy was pretty smart. But I noticed that this other individual on my team, every time he would ask something, he would take it as gospel and had to do it. Then he would just drop everything he had to do because he had to do what the leader suggested. ...Some people, when they see a manager ask a question, they don't think, "Hey, what about that or this?" They think it's, "Oh, I'm told to go do it." He's dropping all our stuff to go on this wild goose chase that the leader sent him on by accident. (Team member)

Summary: Non surprises

Enablers

- Listen, ask insightful questions.
- Ensure people feel trusted that they know what to do or can figure it out.
- Provide guidance about what you need so people know where to concentrate their efforts.
- Take action to remove trouble spots (people, processes, silos, power plays)
- Expect people to be accountable for outcomes.

Barriers

- Frequent or Unexplained changes in objectives
- Micromanaging the process
- Overbearing reporting requirements
- Concentrated decision authority.
Need to ask permission for resources every step of the way.

Surprises

1. **Common Practice is to be concerned about the Process, BUT**
 - ❖ None of our informants blamed the process for empowerment or autonomy challenges.
 - ❖ “Stage Gate helps keep us in line”
 - ❖ Project manager vs project leader mentality...checking boxes vs within-process flexibility & accountability for outcomes.
2. **Empowerment can be situation-specific:** Cultures that support empowerment can easily evaporate when leaders gets nervous due to crisis, urgency, project ambiguity.
 - ❖ Leaders can begin to micromanage, even people they’ve previously trusted.
 - ❖ Can damage the trusting culture they’ve cultivated.
3. **Small teams are commonly viewed as more likely to act autonomously BUT**
 - ❖ Team size was not connected to experiences of empowerment.
 - ❖ Empowerment and autonomy can occur as long as team leader
 - ✓ Clarifies roles and work to be done
 - ✓ Encourages team members to view one another as resources or to reach out to others as needed.
 - ✓ Communicates Effectively and Genuinely

Surprises

4. Clear objectives are great, **BUT** narrowly defined objectives are too limiting
 - ❖ Enormous importance of understanding the entire context of the problem.
 - ❖ Need to have a seat at the table to scope the problem, project initiation.
5. **Team sub-Culture and Project purpose can trump Organizational culture:**
 - ❖ Team Leaders can protect team members from too much change/micromanagement by pushing back.
 - ❖ Teams that sense importance of business impact develop sense of purpose.
6. **Outsized influence of Team leaders on perceived A&E BUT**
 - ❖ Minimal investment in leadership development (1 case out of 5)
 - ❖ Project leader selection based on other characteristics.
 - ❖ Project manager, technical leader, team leader...vs Project leader.

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Questions, Discussion

Thank you