

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 team back from feeling empowered to act on their own?

Our Process

Phase I: IRI project team lengthy discussions to uncover experiences, challenges, real life examples. Representatives from 4 companies. 6 months.

Phase II: Literature Review

Conceptual
Model
Interview
Questions

Phase III: Company Interviews

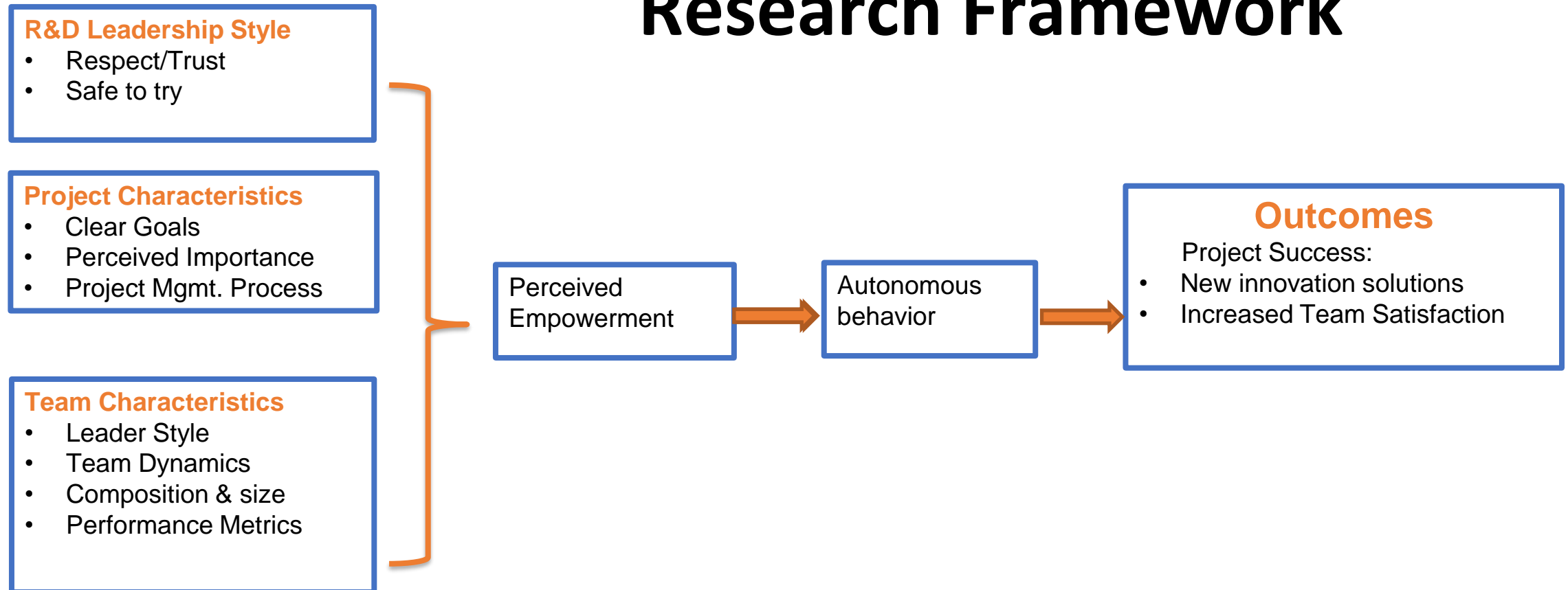
- R&D Leadership
- Project Leaders
- Project Team members

Two companies so far

- Materials Science
- Life Science/Nutrition

Seeking two more

Research Framework



Early Observations/Surprises

1. Common Practice is to be concerned about the Process, **BUT**

- None of our informants blamed the process for empowerment or autonomy challenges.
- Informants who reported Agile and Lean Start –Up reported greater empowerment than the use of Stage Gate.
- **Is Stage-Gate the problem or are there bigger problems beyond process?**

Early Observations/Surprises

2. Empowerment can be situation-specific: BUT Cultures that support empowerment can easily evaporate when senior R&D leaders get nervous due to crisis, urgency, project ambiguity, increased visibility.

- Leaders can begin to micromanage, even people they've previously trusted.
- Can damage the trusting culture they've cultivated.
- **We recognize that this will occur so what are some of the ways you've mitigated this issue?**

Early Observations/Surprises

3. **Autonomy is most often experienced when the goal of the project is clear BUT innovation happens in the murkier contexts.**

- Requires a closer connection to the company's long-term view which is often left unarticulated.
- **How do we empower teams to innovate in ambiguous spaces?**

Early Observations/Surprises

4. Empowerment enables new strategies, processes and behaviors **BUT** the **organizational culture may not be ready to change.**

- Informants reported that cultures of transparency enabled empowerment.
- Teams with cross-functional membership, such as: management representation from the business, marketing, business development, manufacturing and R&D reported greater levels of empowerment.
- **What types of change management practices will help create a culture of empowerment among R&D teams?**

Breakout Rooms

Please choose a facilitator for the read out and remember your team number:
See you in 15 minutes

- **Team 1-** Is Stage-Gate the problem or are their bigger problems beyond process?
- **Team 2-** We recognize R&D team leaders may begin to micro-manage under crisis conditions, what are some of the ways you've mitigated this issue?
- **Team 3-**How do we empower teams to innovate in ambiguous spaces?
- **Team 4-** What types of change management practices will help create a culture of empowerment among R&D teams?

Read Outs

Team 1 - Process

Team 2 – Mitigation Strategies

Team 3 - Ambiguity

Team 4 – Change Management

Thank you!

If you'd like to participate in our research

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