



Leading with Autonomy: Introduction to the research

As a frontline manager, do you need to learn more about how to support or ensure your success and the success of the people who report to you?

Two years ago, the principals at BE GREAT LLC set out to answer this question and, in the process, to fill what they perceived as a gap in the frontline manager and team leader development programs being offered to organizations. The result of this effort is the program Leading with Autonomy.

We began our effort with an extensive 16-month research project that collected 50,000 actual observations from both frontline manager or team leader respondents and from individual contributor direct reports. We were interested in the relationship between frontline managers and their direct reports as well as the quality of the relationship as seen by individuals from both sides. The responses of thousands of individuals at more than 900 firms were collected and analyzed using rigorous statistical methods.

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The purpose of our evidence-based research was to discover the frontline manager-specific leadership behaviors that would have the biggest impact on the performance and commitment levels of the individual contributors and teams that these leaders manage.

The research included not only hundreds of frontline managers, team leaders, and their bosses, but most importantly, the individual contributors who “receive” this leadership. The decision to include the often overlooked “voices” of contributors in the research enabled our team to uncover some valuable and at times surprising data.

As part of the research, team members and direct reports were given a list of 32 frontline-manager leadership behaviors and asked to rate how important each behavior was to improving their own performance. In turn, their managers were also asked to rate how important these same behaviors were to the performance of their direct reports. Of the 32 leadership behaviors, “grants autonomy and does not micromanage” was ranked by individual contributors as the behavior most important to their performance, and by managers as the third most important of the 32 behaviors. In addition, this frontline manager/team leader behavior, stated fully as “Gives me autonomy to do my job with a level of freedom and discretion over how I do the work and doesn’t micromanage me,” was shown to be the one behavior most likely to produce gains in employee commitment. As BE GREAT LLC research discovered, however, managers are not focusing on this critical behavior frequently enough, nor is it being performed as well as employees want or need it to be.

This one behavior, however, is not the whole story. Along with autonomy, employees also want clear expectations. In fact, “makes sure expectations are clear” was employees’ sixth most important leadership behavior, and for managers and their middle manager bosses it was the most important. Besides these two behaviors that employees and managers have in common, employees want managers to provide recognition, coaching, career development, and shared information. They also want opportunities to learn, to problem solve, and to suggest solutions. And they want their managers to listen with open minds and help them achieve their potential.

Giving employees what they want is not an all-or-nothing process. Managers need to be responsible for determining how much autonomy to grant, where to grant it, and how to set parameters and milestones to determine accountability. How much, where, and when all depend on the manager’s assessment of the individual contributor and the contributor’s response to the parameters offered.

So how much autonomy should you grant? It all depends. And determining the dependencies is part of your job as manager. How much autonomy is the contributor ready to take on? What skills does the contributor have? What skills need to be developed? How accountable has the contributor been in the past? How will you ensure accountability now? What level of trust exists between you and this contributor?

To develop effective answers to these kinds of questions, you need to focus on what individual contributors value. Start by considering how the performance of your teams and/or direct reports reflects on your own performance and success. Changing your

VOICES

As one employee who participated in the research said, *“Some managers like to control everything. They think they know more than everyone else, even though they don’t.”*

VOICES

As one employee who participated in the research said, *“My manager gives me the autonomy to determine how I do my work. He is clear with what he expects as an outcome and then helps guide me down the path when help is needed.”*

perspective begins with an accurate understanding of how well you, as the manager, are doing your job now. And an accurate evaluation of your performance includes knowing how your direct reports see things, especially when it comes to the behaviors most important to driving up their levels of performance and commitment and, in particular, the two that both you and they have in common.

The goal of this research is to help you see work interactions through your employees' eyes. Once you do that, you can plan how you will use your leadership skills to meet the needs of your employees and improve their productivity and performance.

You can then decide what actions you will take to ensure your own success and, at the same time, give your employees what they believe they need to ensure theirs.

BE GREAT LLC Research Team: About the Authors and Contributors



Darlene Russ-Eft, Ph.D., is a research scientist with over 30 years of experience in undertaking research related to training design and effectiveness. She is currently Professor of Adult and Higher Education in the College of Education at Oregon State University. Prior to joining OSU, she was Director of Research at AchieveGlobal and Zenger-Miller. Dr. Russ-Eft has published 6 books and over 60 journal articles. She is a board member of ibstpi (International Board of Standards for Training, Performance, and Instruction).



Asha Knutson, Ph.D., is a research scientist with decades of experience in quantitative and qualitative research that supports managerial and leadership effectiveness in diverse industries. She earned her doctorate in curriculum and instruction from the University of Minnesota.



Kathleen Hurson leads BE GREAT LLC's product development efforts. As the former senior vice-president of product development for Zenger Miller and AchieveGlobal, she directed the development of award-winning supervisory, management and leadership development programs. Her frontline management and supervisory knowledge and experience are unparalleled in the field of training and development.



Barry Schwenkmeyer, M.A., creates appealing, accessible learning materials that help frontline managers master new leadership and management concepts and skills. His award-winning work includes videos, case studies, workbooks, toolkits, simulations, and e-learning activities for some of the most successful companies in the world, including Zenger Miller's frontline supervisory and management development solutions. He received both his B.A. and M.A. from Harvard University.



Andrew Rovens is the Chief Operating Officer and Co-Founder of BE GREAT LLC. He directs the company's day-to-day operations, from financial management to the company's global strategic development.



John Rovens is the Chief Executive Officer and Co-Founder of BE GREAT LLC. He founded the firm more than 15 years ago to bring together world-class practitioners, authors, and training providers under a single entity to serve the developmental needs of managers and leaders. He has nearly 30 years of consulting and managerial experience, having managed and led several hundred consulting and professional development projects across the competency development spectrum.

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We focus solely on the training and development needs of frontline people managers and their teams. We offer evidence-based solutions that work.

For more information our research and solutions, visit www.begreatllc.com or call us @415.388.3089