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**Upfront**

**Employee Empowerment**  
**The oxymoron of managing the self-managed**

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## LEADERSHIP

# Employee Empowerment

## *The oxymoron of managing the self-managed*

“I think the longer you are a [traditional] supervisor, the harder it is to let go, to let your constituents [that is, team members] make the decisions,” admitted a team leader in a recent study of self-managing teams. “For 20 years, I always made the decisions and I felt I made the right decisions. But to now turn it over ... I was so afraid they would make the wrong decision that I wouldn’t let them sometimes.”

The growing use of self-managing teams throws traditional notions of leadership into a tailspin. How does the leader influence a self-managing team and others in the organization? How and with whom do leaders build relationships? Who seeks and clarifies information? Who makes the decisions? And how does that leader facilitate team self-management and effectiveness? As the use of self-managing teams grows – driven by greater employee empowerment and globally distributed work teams in for-profit and nonprofit organizations alike – these questions become increasingly more important.

A recent study by Vanessa Druskat of Case Western Reserve University and Jane Wheeler of Bowling Green State University looked to answer these questions. Druskat and Wheeler interviewed and surveyed 19 self-managed teams in a Fortune 500 durable consumer goods manufacturing plant. The researchers compared the actions and strategies of external leaders of high-performing teams to those that led teams with average performance. The study was published

last year in the *Academy of Management Journal* (vol. 46, no. 4).

Outstanding leaders have good boundary-spanning abilities – the ability to relate the needs of their team to the larger organization, and get the necessary support from it. These leaders had a political understanding of the interests of members of powerful departments within the organization. They said things like “I do a lot of politicking ... and I go out of my way to praise those guys [e.g., maintenance and engineering]. I

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**“I wanted to make sure the team’s decisions were the right decisions.”**

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know their likes and dislikes.” The leaders were also adept at scouting for information, making an effort to seek it out from managers, peers, and other experts within the organization.

Within their teams, unlike average leaders who more likely gave self-management lip service, outstanding leaders tended to actually give decision-making authority to their teams. Despite the discomfort most leaders had over delegating decisions, the outstanding leaders were more likely to be open-minded about the team’s decisions and to believe in its ideas. One leader, for instance, had a team

that didn’t want to meet. The leader didn’t force the issue; instead he told them, “It’s all right if you don’t want to, as long as you let me know the problems that you are having.”

Another team wanted to put on a skit at a department meeting. Their leader thought that they could look foolish, but approved the team’s idea anyway. “They put on the skit and it was a very festive atmosphere. ... At the end I saw my team members slapping each other’s hands.” In contrast, the average-performing team leader would be more likely to put the brakes on ideas that they felt were poor. “The team wanted to make the decision,” said one average team leader, “but I wanted to make sure they were the right decisions. You learn a lot over the years.”

The outstanding leaders influenced their team by finding and sharing information on how their team and their organization was performing. The leaders provided quality and cost reports, broken down by the team’s contribution, and frequently used this data to inform the team as to how it could make better choices.

Druskat said that the leadership model they developed applies “wherever leaders cannot be consistently present and where empowering a team makes for better decisions and a greater sense of ownership over outcomes.” For instance, one of Wheeler’s clients, the director of a nonprofit organization, found that after taking “deliberate steps in first establishing a better relationship (i.e., trust) with the other members of the executive management team ... [and] in experimenting with being less visible,” he now has “better influence with the team, which is leading to better team performance.”

–Karen Coppock