

increase autonomy by being clear

When it is not clear where your organisation is heading, how do you expect your team to autonomously move forward in the right direction?

The only way to enable autonomous decision-making, is by being extremely clear on the context in which decisions have to be made. This includes vision, mission, objectives and limitations.

Weak leaders tend to spend a lot of time on these organizational elements, whereas smart leaders know that a context will only contribute if it is simple, unambiguously and easy to remember. So, skip all the obvious, be precise and distinctive, and share the direction as much as possible.

I always have found it useful to reduce the elements of an organization's direction as follows.

Mission

A mission is a thing you're setting out to do. Compare it to the military interpretation of a mission. It is not an everlasting objective, but rather a target we set for ourselves for the mid-term. A mission can be accomplished. Therefore missions can change over time. That's ok. A perfect mission starts with: "We are going to/have to/must...".

Vision

A vision is something your organisation believes in. It is a binding faith. People that do not share this belief, should not be in your organisation, as they apparently are after something else and therefore by default not contributing to reaching the goal of the organisation. A vision typically starts with: "We believe ..". Simon Sinek has some excellent stuff on this.

Objectives

Objectives are the goals you set for the organisation. The fewer goals, the better. Have the guts to choose. I remember an organisation having two goals. One was to have a certain score in terms of employee satisfaction, the other had to do with customer satisfaction. We learned that customer satisfaction follows employee satisfaction. When we dropped customer satisfaction as a goal, nothing happened. Customers were still happy, maybe even more so because for all employees it became even more clear on what to base their day-to-day decisions. So, have one goal (yes, it is possible) and be very specific when that goal is reached and what happens then. Define the "party" upfront, and what needs to be achieved for everyone to know the party is on! The objective should start with: "We celebrate when ..."

Limitations

Autonomy only works when the boundaries of autonomous decision-making are perfectly clear. When limitations in autonomy are not clear, people will get hesitant. This will reduce the level of autonomous decision making, or at least slow down decision making significantly.

As it is impossible to define the exact boundaries of all all potential decision making within an organisation, mistakes will be made. How you deal with mistakes will be decisive in successfully installing autonomy. Be too severe, and no one will dare to give it another try. Be too easy, and existing limitations will have lost their value. Thus, make sure there is an ongoing discussion on the boundaries in autonomy that exist, so everyone will understand the rationale behind them. Attach them to the vision, and people may even be able to determine themselves the boundaries when they are not explicitly stated. Boundaries are best stated in a positive way and start like: "We can".

So, what should an organization's direction statement be like? Below you'll find a template and some examples. Try for yourself to see how they might enable team members to go about autonomously, without the need for approval or consent. How would these statements help you in becoming self-guiding?

TEMPLATE

Mission	We are going to/must/have to ...
Vision	We believe ...
Objectives	We celebrate when ...
Boundaries	We can ...

EXAMPLE

Mission	We are going to expand to all continents
Vision	We believe that happy people excell in what they do
Objectives	We will invite artist Y to our annual party when we are number one in employee happiness in competition X.
Boundaries	We can decide for ourselves as long as we never wager the continuity of the organisation part you are working for

Mission	We are going to deliver the best marketing campaigns out there
Vision	We believe facts and data build effective campaigns

Objectives	We celebrate when 90% of our customers meet the targets they set for the campaigns we managed for them. The celebration will be a big festival with families and friends.
Boundaries	We can decide as long as we have the data to back our decisions.

Mission	We are educating the people of the future
Vision	We believe happy teachers are the best teachers
Objectives	We celebrate when we are awarded the title of "Klassewerkplek". When that happens, we will create funds to all visit a research conference on primary education or related subjects.
Boundaries	We are autonomous in our daily work as long as we can explain the scientific rationale behind our actions.