



Delegating: Tannenbaum and Schmidt Continuum

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Delegation and Team Development

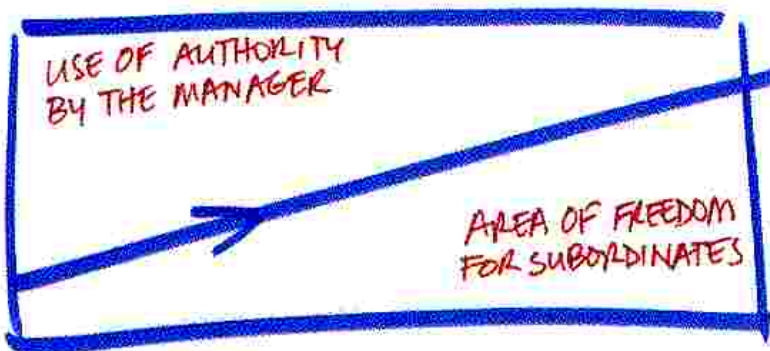
The Tannenbaum and Schmidt Continuum is a simple model of [leadership theory](#) which shows the relationship between the level of freedom that a manager chooses to give to a team and the level of authority used by the manager.

As the team's freedom is increased, so the manager's authority decreases. This is a positive way for both teams and managers to develop.

While the Tannenbaum and Schmidt model concerns delegated freedom to a group, the principle of being able to apply different levels of delegated freedom closely relates to the ['levels of delegation'](#) on the [delegation](#) page.

As a manager, a key responsibility is to develop your team. You should delegate and ask a team to make its own decisions to varying degrees according to their abilities. There is a rising scale of levels of delegated freedom that you can use when working with your team.

The Tannenbaum and Schmidt Continuum is often shown as a simple graph:



Over time, a manager should aim to take the team from one end of the scale to the other, at which point the aim should be to have developed one or many potential successors from within your team to assume the managerial position.

This process can take a year or two, or even longer, so be patient, explain what you're doing, and be aware constantly of how your team is responding and developing.

When examining and applying the Tannenbaum and Schmidt principles, it's extremely important to remember: irrespective of the amount of responsibility and freedom delegated by a manager to a team, the manager retains accountability for any catastrophic problems that result.

Delegating freedom and decision-making responsibility to a team does not absolve the manager of accountability. That's why delegating, whether to teams or individuals, requires a mature manager.

If everything goes well, the team must get the credit; if it all goes wrong, the manager must take the blame. This is justified, as the manager is ultimately responsible for judging the seriousness of any given situation - including the risks entailed - and the level of

Here are the Tannenbaum and Schmidt Continuum levels of delegated freedom, with some added explanation that should make it easier to understand and apply.

1. The Manager decides and announces the decision

The manager assesses options in light of various aims, issues, priorities, timescales. He then decides the action and informs the team of the decision.

The manager will probably have considered how the team will react, but the team plays no active part in making the decision. The team may well perceive that the manager has not considered the team's welfare at all. This is seen by the team as a purely task-based decision, which is generally a characteristic of [X-Theory](#) management style.

2. The manager decides and then 'sells' the decision to the group

The manager makes the decision and then explains the reasoning to the team, particularly the positive benefits that the team will enjoy from the decision.

In so doing the manager is seen by the team to recognise the team's importance, and to have some concern for the team.

3. The manager presents the decision with background ideas and invites questions

The manager presents the decision along with some of the context.

The team is invited to ask questions and discuss this with the manager, which enables the team to understand and accept or agree with the decision more easily than in 1 and 2 above.

This more participative approach enables the team to appreciate the issues and reasons for the decision as well as the implications of all the options.

Therefore, this will have a more motivational approach than 1 or 2 because of the higher level of discussion and consensus.

4. The manager suggests a provisional decision and invites discussion

The manager discusses and reviews the provisional decision with the team on the basis that the manager will take on board the views and then finally decide.

This enables the team to have influence over the manager's final decision. This also acknowledges that the team can contribute to the decision-making process, which is more involving and therefore motivating than the previous level.

5. The manager presents the situation or problem, gets suggestions, then decides

The manager presents the situation, and maybe some options, to the team. The team is encouraged and expected to offer ideas and additional options, and discuss implications of each possible course of action.

The manager then decides which option to take. This level is one of high and specific involvement for the team. It is particularly appropriate when the team has more detailed knowledge or experience of the issues than the manager.

Therefore, the team's deep involvement and high influence provide result in higher motivation and freedom than any previous level.

6. The manager explains the situation, defines the parameters and asks the team to decide

At this level, the manager has effectively delegated responsibility to the team, albeit within the manager's stated limits.

The manager may or may not choose to be a part of the team which decides. While this level appears to give a huge responsibility to the team, the manager can control the risk and outcomes to an extent, according to the constraints that he stipulates.

This level is more motivational than any previous ones, thus requiring a mature team for any serious situation or problem.

Remember that the team must get the credit for all the positive outcomes from the decision, while the manager remains accountable for any resulting problems or disasters.

While this isn't strictly included in the original Tannenbaum and Schmidt definitions, it needs pointing out due to its value in delegating, motivating, and leadership.

This is an extreme level of freedom, whereby the team is effectively doing what the manager did in level 1.

The team is given responsibility for identifying and analysing the situation or problem; the process for resolving it; developing and assessing options; evaluating implications, and then deciding on and implementing a course of action.

☰ The manager also states in advance that he/she will support the decision and help the team implement it. The manager may or may not be part of the team, and if so then he/she has no more authority than anyone else in the team.

The only constraints and parameters for the team are the ones that the manager had imposed on him/her from above (again, the manager retains accountability for any resulting disasters, while the team must get the credit for all successes).

This level is potentially the most motivational of all, but also potentially the most disastrous. The team must be mature and competent and capable of acting at a genuinely strategic decision-making level.

See also

- [Leadership Theories](#)
- [Tuckman's 'forming storming norming performing' model](#).
- [Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](#)
- [Charles Handy](#)
- [Adams' Equity Theory](#)
- [McClelland's Motivational Theory](#)
- [Teambuilding and motivational activities](#), for example the [Hellespont Swim case study and exercise](#)

Authorship/Referencing

© Tannenbaum & Schmidt original continuum model; Alan Chapman review, code, design 1995-2012

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