



Positive Leadership: Key Ingredients For Unleashing The Best In Others

Anne M. Brafford, JD, MAPP, PhD in Progress
 abrafford@aspire.legal | www.aspire.legal

Wouldn't we all love to work in law firms that bring out our best? And, as aspiring positive leaders, wouldn't we all love to know the secrets to unleashing the best in others? Psychological science offers some helpful insights on these very questions. Of particular importance is a well-established and powerfully predictive framework of human motivation called "self-determination theory" (SDT), which forms the foundation of my book *Positive Professionals*. SDT identifies key ingredients that contribute to optimal performance, health, and happiness.

SDT proposes that we're all naturally inclined toward growth and happiness and that our social surroundings facilitate or thwart our path toward optimal functioning. Our continued growth depends on whether our social conditions thwart or help meet basic psychological needs:

- ✓ **Autonomy.** This need is driven by a basic human desire to be "self-creating" and under self-rule. It's about feeling authentic and like the author and architect of our own behavior—that our behavior aligns with our interests and values and is within our responsibility and control. It is the opposite of feeling controlled, bossed around, or guilted in to things.
- ✓ **Connection & Belonging (or "Relatedness").** We humans have a fundamental need to connect and belong. This includes supportive relationships as well as a sense of belonging or fit with groups we care about. This need is powerful and pervasive. It can help or harm our cognitive processes, emotional patterns, behaviors, and health and well-being. Lack of belonging and feelings of exclusion can trigger self-defeating behaviors like procrastination and depression.

- ✓ **Mastery (or "Competence").** Our fundamental needs also include feeling confident in our ability to master new skills and to have an impact on our environment. Continuous learning and a growing sense of mastery in activities that are significant to us are keys to this source of well-being.
- ✓ **Helping Others (or "Benevolence").** Research also suggests that we have a basic need to feel that we're benefiting others or the common good.

Ingredients For Thriving Firms



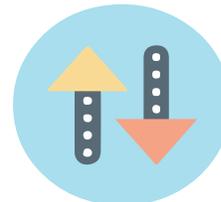
Connection & Belonging

Supportive relationships and a sense of belonging or fit with groups we care about.



Mastery Activities

Continually learning, growing, and gaining confidence in our ability to make things happen.



Autonomy

Feeling that our choices are self-authored and aligned with our own preferences. The opposite of feeling controlled, forced, or guilt-driven.



Helping Others

Having a positive impact on others or the common good.



This may all sound fine and good but still leave you wondering if it really applies to that special breed of people called *lawyers*. Recent research shows that it absolutely does.

Researchers Larry Krieger (a law professor-turned-researcher) and Dr. Kennon Sheldon (a highly respected social scientist) conducted a large-scale study of 6,000 lawyers working in a wide variety of legal jobs. The study, titled [What Makes Lawyers Happy?](#), asked what kinds of things in lawyers' social surroundings contributed to their happiness.

It found that SDT needs made a huge difference in lawyers' lives. The relationships between lawyer happiness and SDT needs was much larger than other factors in the study. For example, the positive relationship between need-fulfillment and happiness was three times as large as the relationship between income and happiness. And whether lawyers had achieved a high class rank during law school (something that so many law students stress out about) had a very small relationship with their current levels of happiness.

SUPPORTING THE AUTONOMY NEED

All of the SDT needs are essential ingredients to thriving workplace cultures. But we need to start somewhere, and the autonomy need is a good place to start. (My book [Positive Professionals](#) offers strategies for fulfilling all of the needs). Leaders, colleagues, clients, and workplace policies and practices all can support or undermine our sense of autonomy.

Experiencing autonomy goes hand-in-hand with feeling respected, valued, and important. It is the experience of choosing an activity freely because it aligns with our own values, goals, and desires—it aligns with who we are. It's not synonymous with individualism or detachment. In particular, it doesn't mean that we must act independently from others' desires. Instead, it's a need to act with a sense of choice and volition, even if doing so might mean complying with the wishes of others.

Autonomy at work typically takes the form of discretion for work scheduling, decision-making, and work methods. All three forms of autonomy significantly contribute to job satisfaction and engagement, but decision-making autonomy leads the pack. Below are some strategies for fostering a culture that supports autonomy:

1. FOSTER A SENSE OF CONTROL

Autonomy is closely related to the concept of control—which affects not only engagement but also psychological health. Feeling in control of one's own work and schedule is a well-established factor contributing to mental health. Lack of control—especially in the face of high demands—is a strong predictor of depression and burnout. A high level of responsibility with little control is a toxic combination that can destroy health and performance.

2. OPTIMIZE INDEPENDENCE

Among the best way to support autonomy is to allow as much independence and discretion as followers' level of experience and competence allow. We should allow people to figure things out for themselves, make their own choices as much as possible, and not hijack the project at the first sign of a wobble.

3. GIVE FLEXIBILITY IN TIME & PLACE OF WORK

Flexibility in where and when followers' do their work also helps meet their autonomy need. Technology has dramatically enhanced the potential for such flexibility, making telecommuting both feasible and desirable because it provides greater autonomy and job satisfaction.

Many firms still have not embraced the full potential for flexibility, although some have formally adopted telecommuting policies. Some lawyers continue to frown on the practice, having long relied on “face time” in the office as a de facto measure of commitment and productivity. They worry that associates will shirk their responsibilities if allowed to work from home. In short, they don't trust them.



Recent research should help allay these concerns. A 2015 study that crossed industries found that telecommuting did not harm workers’ performance—and, in fact, boosted it. They found that the autonomy need was at the root of the effect. Workers felt grateful for the trust and autonomy granted to them by their organizations and so reciprocated with greater energy that positively influenced their performance.

4. FRAME WORK-RELATED COMMUNICATIONS TO RESPECT AUTONOMY

When making work-related requests, leaders respect followers’ autonomy by using words of influence rather than coercion. Dwight D. Eisenhower defined motivation as “the art of getting people to do what you want them to do because they want to do it.” This is precisely what leaders do when they tailor work requests to respect autonomy.

To take Eisenhower’s advice, research shows that we should show responsiveness to others’ perspectives,

avoid bossy- or coercive-sounding language, give meaningful rationales for requests, and offer opportunities for choice. For example, a junior lawyer might question the tight deadline given for a project but still act willingly and autonomously because the partner provided a meaningful rationale for it.

The opposite of an autonomy-orientated leadership style is a controlling one. Controlling leaders ignore others’ needs, interests, and feelings. To motivate followers, they use directives, threats, incentives, and deadlines. In short, they’re bossy and rely on power differentials to motivate. The result is extrinsic, low-quality motivation among followers and all the trouble that flows from that.

Research has found that, no matter what your natural tendencies, you can learn to use a more autonomy-oriented style. Below are some fairly simple research-backed behaviors that you can adopt to start championing autonomy right away:

Autonomy-Supportive Communications

BEHAVIOR

Use language that doesn’t sound controlling or coercive. (Avoid bossiness.)

Take followers’ perspectives and acknowledge their feelings.

Give rationales for requests.

Tailor motivation strategies to account for followers’ interests, preferences, work-related values, and to boost their confidence in their abilities to be effective and master new skills.

Maximize followers’ sense of choice and self-initiation.

EXAMPLE

“Can you please ___? It would be really helpful if you could ___.”

“I’m sorry about this short turn-around t. I know it’s a pain and I’m sorry about that.”

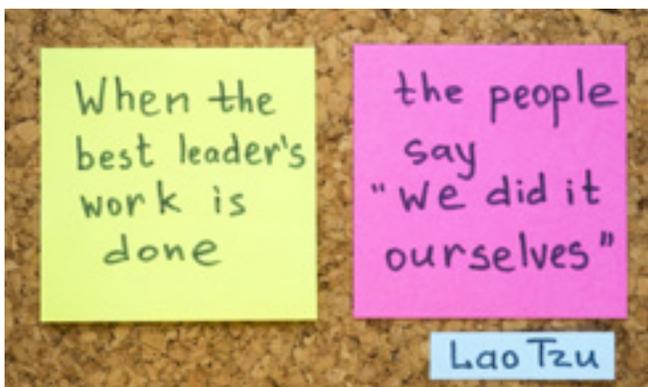
“The client just asked for this by tomorrow.”

“I wouldn’t ask just anyone to do this, but I know you can handle it. And the upside is that it might give you a chance to take a deposition.”

“I know it’s getting late and it’s fine if you want to go home and work there. What time do you think is reason-able to get me a draft?”

5. USE PARTICIPATORY LEADERSHIP

In participatory management styles, leaders invite others' suggestions, solicit input, and spur open discussions for identifying new solutions. This type of leadership demonstrates that leaders value others' opinions, contributions, and talents. When people are involved in making decisions, they feel more autonomous when carrying them out. This tactic boosts followers' sense of meaningfulness because they feel valued and that their opinions matter. On the other hand, people who are left out of decision-making have a higher risk of burnout.



WON'T THIS TAKE MORE TIME & EFFORT?

It's true that autonomy-oriented leadership often requires investment of extra effort compared to directive or controlling styles. It can be easier to boss people around than inspire them. But research indicates that it's worth it. It will pay off by enhancing motivation and engagement.

RESOURCES

Book Recommendations

- Anne Brafford, *Positive Professionals: Creating High-Performing, Profitable Firms Through The Science of Engagement*
- Liz Wiseman, *Multipliers: How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter*
- Jane Dutton & Gretchen Spreitzer (Editors), *How to Be A Positive Leader*
- Daniel Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*
- Michael Bungay Stanier, *The Coaching Habit: Say Less, Ask More, & Change The Way You Lead Forever*
- Paul J. Zak, *Trust Factor: The Science of Creating High-Performance Companies*
- Bruce Avolio, *Leadership Development in The Balance*
- John Mackey & Raj Sisodia, *Conscious Capitalism: Liberating the Heroic Spirit of Business*

Autonomy-Support Checklist:

- ✓ Foster a Sense of Control
- ✓ Optimize Independence
- ✓ Give Flexibility in Time & Place
- ✓ Make Non-Controlling Requests
- ✓ Use Participatory Leadership

