Info Sheet – Tannenbaum and Schmidt Continuum

**Model of delegation and team development**

The Tannenbaum and Schmidt Continuum is a simple model 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 7 levels of delegation. As a manager, one of your responsibilities 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 to the other, up the scale, at which point you should also aim to have developed one or a number of potential successors from within your team to take over from you. 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 absolutely does not absolve the manager of accountability. That's why delegating, whether to teams or individuals, requires a very grown-up manager.

If everything goes well, the team must get the credit; if it all goes horribly wrong, the manager must take the responsibility. This is entirely fair, because the manager is ultimately responsible for judging the seriousness of any given situation - including the risks entailed - and the level of freedom that can safely be granted to the team to deal with it. This is not actually part of the Tannbaum and Schmidt Continuum, but it's vital to apply this philosophy or the model will definitely be weakened, or at worse completely back-fire.

Here's 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 reviews options in light of aims, issues, priorities, timescale, etc., 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).

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

The manager makes the decision as in 1 above, and then explains reasons for the decision 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 recognize the team's importance, and to have some concern for the team.

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

The manager presents the decision along with some of the background which led to the decision. The team is invited to ask questions and discuss with the manager the rationale behind the decision, which enables the team to understand and accept or agree with the decision more easily than in 1 dn 2 above.

This more participative and involving approach enables the team to appreciate the issues and reasons for the decision, and the implications of all the options. This will have a more motivational approach than 1 or 2 because of the higher level of team involvement and discussion.

1. The manager suggests a provisional decision and invites discussion about it

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 some real influence over the shape of the manager's final decision. This also acknowledges that the team has something to contribute to the decision-making process, which is more involving and therefore motivating than the previous level.

1. 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, and is appropriate particularly when the team has more detailed knowledge or experience of the issues than the manager. Being high-involvement and high-influence for the team this level provides more motivation and freedom than any previous level.

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

At this level the manager has effectively delegated responsibility for the decision 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 gives 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, and requires 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. This isn't strictly included in the original Tananbaum and Schmidt definitions, so it needs pointing out because it's such an important aspect of delegating and motivating, and leadership.)

1. The manager allows the team to identify the problem, develop the options, and decide on the action, within the manager's received limits

This is obviously 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 analyzing 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 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. Not surprisingly the team must be mature and competent, and capable of acting at what is a genuinely strategic decision-making.