



Briefing

What leadership will give

The freedom scale, read from the manager's chair

FTTM leadership series.

A four-page briefing for executive teams: why empowerment programs stall, what the freedom scale actually measures, and the working session that turns it into signed authority.

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Companion to the Ideas article

The instrument

The scale, read as control type

Three questions come up in almost every executive session we run. Why don't leaders empower? What is the relationship between empowered teams and speed? And why don't functions release more control to cross-functional teams? The three questions have one answer, and it lives in the freedom scale, adapted from Bill Oncken's five degrees of initiative [1] with the numbering flipped so Level 1 is the destination.

Almost everyone presents the scale as a measure of the team: how much initiative people are ready to take. We present it as control type, from the perspective of the manager, in the manager's own first person. Levels 3 through 5 give me control before the subordinate acts. Level 2 lets me control while they are doing it. Level 1 only lets me influence their actions after they have done something.

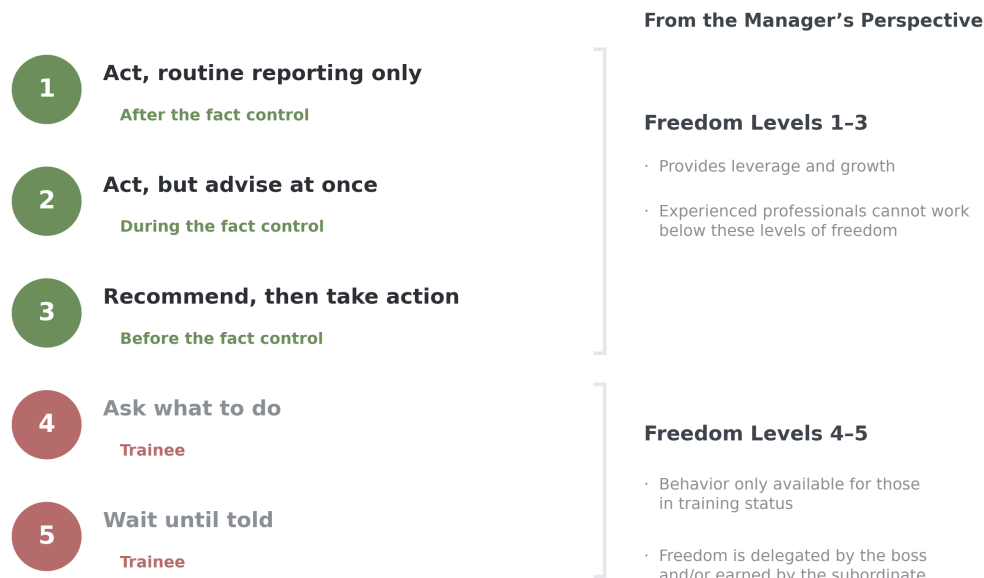


Figure 1. The freedom scale, from the manager's perspective. Levels 1 to 3 provide leverage and growth; Levels 4 and 5 are trainee states.

What holding a team at Levels 3 to 5 costs

The team never gets fast. Every trade-off waits for a recommendation to be read and a decision to be made. Across the few dozen decisions a team makes in a quarter, the wait is weeks on the critical path. **The leader never gets leverage.** A senior professional held at Level 3 produces junior output at a senior salary, while the executive above them reviews inputs instead of governing outcomes. **The people never develop.** Levels 4 and 5 are training states, time-boxed by design: Level 5 is for someone's first day or two, Level 4 for their first few weeks. Anyone seasoned who is kept there will quietly disempower themselves or leave.

The argument and the mechanism

Speed, and the signed matrix

Empowerment as a value rarely persuades an executive. A critical path does. A cross-functional team makes a few dozen trade-off decisions in a quarter. Hold it at Level 3 and every decision waits for a recommendation to be written, read, and ruled on: call it three days each, and twenty-four decisions cost ten weeks of serialized waiting. Level 2 removes the wait. Level 1 removes the recommendation as well. The freedom level sets the decision latency, the latency multiplies across every decision on the program, and the product lands on the critical path. The continuum is not new: Tannenbaum and Schmidt drew boss-centered versus team-centered leadership in 1958 [2]. Most organizations still operate at the boss-centered end.

Why functions hold on, and what releases them

A functional manager is measured on control of a specialty. Releasing people to a cross-functional team means trade-offs inside the specialty get made without the function's signoff, and nothing in the function's scoreboard pays for that. Blame the scoreboard, not the people playing to it. The fix is to make the trade explicit: an empowerment matrix. List the decision areas, assign a default freedom level to each, negotiate the cells where the function's expectation and the team's understanding differ, and publish the result.

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Trade-offs inside the frozen spec					
Schedule pull-ins and re-planning					
Spending inside the approved budget					
Design changes after freeze					
Supplier and partner selection					
Capital above the approved limit					

never in a strong team's matrix

Figure 2. An empowerment matrix. Decision areas are examples; the matrix is negotiated per program, signed by leadership, and published to everyone.

Freedom is granted per element of work, not per person: the same engineer can hold Level 1 on trade-offs inside the spec and Level 3 on capital. That is why the matrix has rows. Levels 4 and 5 do not appear in a strong team's matrix at all. The act of writing the matrix is the act of empowerment, because it forces leadership to decide on paper, in advance, what it will let the team own.

The practice

The working session

The key point is not so much what freedom level the team will take, but rather what freedom level leadership will give. Freedom is delegated by the boss, earned by the subordinate, or both. A team that takes Level 1 into a hierarchy that insists on before-the-fact control will be pulled back to Level 3 within a quarter. Both sides have to move, and leadership moves first. Put the scale in front of the leadership team, alone, and make them discuss it: ninety minutes, decision area by decision area, ending with a signed matrix.

The self-report gap

Both bosses and subordinates overstate the freedom actually granted. Have each side score the other, and expect the team's scores of leadership to come in one level lower than leadership's own. The gap is the agenda.

The UNIDIR bridge

The transition from Level 3 to Level 2 has a bridge that costs nothing to adopt: the UNIDIR convention, "unless otherwise directed, I intend to." The team defaults to action while leadership keeps a window to object. David Marquet built a submarine command around the same sentence and wrote the story in *Turn the Ship Around!* [3].

The trust exchange

Level 1 requires the executive to judge actions fairly after the fact, including the ones that turn out wrong. The first Level 1 decision that goes badly is the whole program: treat it as a learning event in public and the freedom holds; treat it as a punishable offense and every team watching returns to asking.

The bet. Teams cannot take more freedom than leadership is willing to give. Say what you will grant, decision area by decision area, sign it, and hold the line the first time Level 1 costs you something. That is what empowerment is. Everything else is a poster.

References

- [1] Oncken, W. Jr., and Wass, D. L. "Management Time: Who's Got the Monkey?" *Harvard Business Review*, November–December 1974, reissued 1999.
- [2] Tannenbaum, R., and Schmidt, W. H. "How to Choose a Leadership Pattern." *Harvard Business Review*, March–April 1958.
- [3] Marquet, L. D. *Turn the Ship Around! A True Story of Turning Followers into Leaders*. Portfolio/Penguin, 2012.
- [4] Mitchell, N. "Freedom to Act." *lateralworks Ideas*, January 15, 2019. <https://lateralworks.com/ideas/freedom-to-act>
- [5] lateralworks. "Before the fact leadership." FTTM Methodology series, May 2026. <https://lateralworks.com/papers/before-the-fact-leadership>
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