"… in today's fast-paced and dynamic work environment, employees need to quickly respond to change, share knowledge across the organization, and seize emerging opportunities. In short, people need to contribute their full thinking, problem solving and creativity for the betterment of the organization."

Unleash Agency in Your Organization

The Next Steps to Higher Performance and Greater Inclusion

By Judith H. Katz and Frederick A. Miller

Abstract

Today's workforce is compelling organizations to take a leap forward. Returning to the old ways of micromanaging, control and expecting workers to be in the office five days a week are no longer constraints that many people are willing to endure. At the same time, the role of managers and supervisors is dramatically changing, calling on them to create environments in which people feel trusted to make decisions, feel included, valued and seen for their contributions, and have a greater sense of authority, autonomy and leadership to do their best work, no matter what their level or their role.

In short, people want greater agency.

Agency is defined as...

all people, of all identities, roles, levels, and tenure have the power, influence, and voice to make choices and decisions related to their jobs and the betterment of the organization.

Agency is the next transformation needed for individuals, teams and organizations to be higher performing. In this article, based on our forthcoming book,[1] we discuss how managers and supervisors can unleash agency in their organizations; and, the role of organization change agents in supporting efforts to enable agency at every organization level.

Keywords: OD intervention strategies; unleash agency; managers' role in change; inclusive culture; mindsets; organization narratives; empowerment, Dialogic OD; employee-manager relationship.

When it comes to the breakthroughs that are needed for today's workforce, it is clear to us that the workplace must take a leap. There is a higher level of expectations of what people need and want from their organizations to be committed and do their best work, and an incremental response will not do (Morgan, 2014; Bloom, 2023). In a recent *OD Review* article (Miller & Katz,

2023), we wrote about the need to address agency as the next element in the creation of higher performing, inclusive organizations. We noted that while *"inclusion is vital to an organization's transformation from a monocultural club to one that ensures its culture, policies and practices are equitable and support the value added of differences… we see the need for agency, as the next step on that journey of change"* (Miller & Katz, 2023 p.50).

Agency is defined as...

all people, of all identities, roles, levels, and tenure have the power, influence,

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1. *Miller, F.A. & Katz, J. H.,* The Power of Agency: Cultivating Autonomy, Authority and Leadership in Every Role*, will be published in 2024 by Berrett-Koehler.*

and voice to make choices and decisions related to their jobs and the betterment of the organization.

Empowerment	Agency
Is bestowed or given	Is inherent
Managers give people empowerment	Managers unleash people's agency by removing barriers
Managers allow people to be empowered	Managers support people's agency
Focus on increasing individual self-esteem and self-confidence	Focus on individual choice, decision making, autonomy

Figure 1. Empowerment and Agency

When people have agency, they know they are full and deserving members of the organization and their voices will be heard. They are willing to speak up, identify problems, and raise tough issues when something is misaligned with the mission and values of the organization. With agency, every person feels a sense of ownership and accountability for improving things within their area of responsibility and they have the decision rights to make things happen within their responsibility. In this article, based on our forthcoming book,[2] we discuss: the evolution of the workplace to greater agency; how agency differs from empowerment; how managers and supervisors can unleash agency in their organizations; and, the role of organization change agents in supporting efforts to enable agency at every organization level.

The Evolution of the Workplace to Greater Agency for All: Changing Manager-Employee Interactions and the Role of Inclusion

Agency is needed not only in the evolution of creating more inclusive and higher performing organizations but also in the evolution of manager-employee interaction. In too many organizations employees are relegated to a "do-er" role with the manager operating as a checker of every significant decision or output that the employee makes. This makes many people feel as if they are not the Operating Officer/leader of their job responsibilities and limits their voice and influence. While many employees are described as knowledge workers (Drucker, 1967; Palmer, 2014; Mergel et al 2008; Surawski, 2019) and organizations talk about the need to tap into employee thoughts and ideas for innovation, process improvement and creativity, the reality is that many individuals are treated by

managers and supervisors as if they were still in the days of the Industrial Revolution—as little more than "hands and feet," needing to be checked and re-checked and controlled. In addition, many people experience being smothered by their manager: they are micro-managed, information they need is gate-kept, and they feel as if they need permission to take the actions and make the decisions required to do their job. Although the manager might see this as being careful and preventing mistakes, it disempowers people and causes people to be and act smaller, take fewer risks and less accountability.

And yet, in today's fast-paced and dynamic work environment, employees need to quickly respond to change, share knowledge across the organization, and seize emerging opportunities. In short, people need to contribute their full thinking, problem solving and creativity for the betterment of the organization.

This goes hand in hand with the need to have individuals of all backgrounds to be able to bring their diverse perspectives to every situation. The ability to influence, have voice, and execute with autonomy are essential elements of the practice of inclusion in today's organizations, which is why agency is not only about transforming the manager-employee interaction but also about the core tenets of inclusion. Everyone in today's workforce needs to experience a sense of belonging and supportive energy from colleagues, leaders, and others so that they can do their best work (Katz & Miller, 2009; Miller & Katz, 2002). Inclusion is a foundational building block to agency. Agency enables all individuals to have power, voice and decision making in their day-to-day interactions and work.

Empowerment and Agency: Connected but Different

Many organizations and change agents have provided tools for managers to empower employees (Blanchard et al, 1997; Block, 2016; Gherson & Gratton, 2022; Loehr &Schwartz, 2003; Mautz, 2021). While empowerment is clearly needed, it differs from agency in some significant ways (see *Figure 1*). Many empowerment efforts focus on managers *giving* people empowerment, i.e., "empower your people." Many efforts describe empowerment as critical for marginalized or disempowered groups, to *allow them* to have a voice and influence in various aspects of their work. All of these imply that empowerment is bestowed on individuals. In addition, empowerment efforts are often designed to increase an individual or group's self-esteem and self-confidence (Ma et al, 2021).

One of our premises is that agency exists in all people. Agency is not about giving or allowing individuals to make decisions. Agency cannot be bestowed or given; it needs to be unleashed. People have agency, but often situations and organizations construct ways to limit it. Boundaries regarding agency are needed, many organizations, however, limit agency so much that they are nowhere near those boundaries, let alone in danger of crossing them. Moving to greater agency requires managers and team members to discuss what agency means and where people can exercise their agency. It means removing barriers so that people can succeed. Managers need to clearly identify which decisions they own and which situations they want or need their voice to be a part of the decision making and execution process.

Clarity is critical, and there is much room for individual and team agency in our organizations.

In today's organizations with challenges around every corner and a wealth of digital tools connecting us to more information and people than ever before, people need to be able to act without having multiple meetings or having a checker who checks them. Speed is a hallmark of today's needs and expectations. We increase speed by unleashing agency.

We see evidence of how individuals are taking greater agency in their lives with the rise of entrepreneurism and the gig economy. Many people see themselves as having more options in how and where they want to live and work rather than be in an organization structure that limits their choices and flexibility (Miller & Katz, 2023). More and more people are redefining what success at work means to them. There is no disputing the fact that workforce conditions and expectations have changed dramatically in the last few years. Removing the restrictions and barriers that limit people's ability to exert their knowledge and make things happen is critical for fully tapping the skills and talents of today's workforce.

Organizational Change to Foster Greater Agency

The journey to enable greater agency will be difficult for many organizations and people at all levels. Many organizations may be unaware of how they have created barriers that limit the exercise of agency. Due to a lack of interaction safety (Miller & Katz, 2018), decisions are often pushed up the organizations for fear of individuals making a bad decision and being punished. Bureaucratic "red tape" may exist that makes raising an issue not worth the effort. Those who have taken actions may have suffered retribution —experiencing a metaphorical "slap on the wrist" (or more severe disciplinary action). Some in the workforce may be skeptical that real agency is possible and will not believe it until they experience it—likely until they experience it again and again.

There are six factors that are critical to foster a culture of agency:
1. feeling trusted;
2. having choice about how people accomplish their tasks and their work;
3. experiencing autonomy and the authority to act;
4. feeling responsibility for one's output;
5. experiencing ownership to do one's job; and,
6. having the authority and power to address issues in their areas of responsibility and make decisions accordingly.

The ability to unleash agency within the organization requires culture change. Organizations will need to integrate the support of agency for individuals, teams, and managers/supervisors into HR and management systems to ensure they recognize and reward all people as they exert greater agency. Performance management must reflect how managers are supporting agency for their teams. Barriers and restrictions that exist to support and encourage a culture of agency will need to be identified and removed. Leaders will need to initiate and engage the organization in a dialogic approach about the desire to support agency and why it is critical for higher performance. In addition, the organization will need a new narrative that identifies how the culture must change and a FROM–TO statement defining today's reality and articulating the desired future in which agency for all is the new norm (Miller & Katz, 2023; Miller, Biggs & Katz, 2023).

Manager's Role in Unleashing Agency

Not only does organizational culture affect individuals' ability to exercise agency, the impact of having agency on people managers is profound as well. Managers and supervisors—many of whom are already stretched thin and lack the interaction and leadership skills they need to be highly effective—must grapple with how to lead a workforce that is less connected

due to remote/hybrid work, often more diverse, and has higher expectations than ever before (Mintzberg, 2013; Smith, 2011; Zhang, 2021). A culture of agency requires managers to develop, connect with, know, trust, and partner with people versus micromanage them. In a culture of agency, managers and supervisors understand what each person needs to do their best work, feel a sense of agency, and utilize that agency. They have the bandwidth to provide the mentoring, coaching, and feedback people need to make good decisions and to grow and develop. They communicate transparently so that their teams, individually and collectively, are aware of

Organizational Actions to Move to Greater Agency

- Initiate and engage in an organization dialogic approach about the desire to build and sustain a culture of agency.
- Create an organization narrative that supports agency and a FROM–TO that shows the difference between the current state and how the organization will operate with agency as a norm.
- Ensure HR policies, management practices, and other aspects of operations integrate agency into how work gets done and support this new way of operating.
- Develop and disseminate language about what agency is and is not.
- Clarify and communicate expectations for decision making and ensure people have the training needed to operate in a culture of agency.
- Recognize and reward agency in action—acknowledge people's contributions and the exercise of agency.
- Create accountability and performance metrics for how leaders foster and support agency and include enabling agency as criteria for promotion.
- Assess the degree to which the exercise of agency is or isn't equitably dispersed across the workforce and identify actions to address any gaps.

the boundaries and expectations related to agency. They can focus on removing barriers, facilitating working across the organization, and ensuring that the output that their team members produce is effectively utilized. In an organization of agency, managers provide the resources, tools, and access that their team members need to succeed. In a culture of agency, managers and supervisors not only support their direct reports in exerting and claiming their agency; they themselves are able to exercise agency in their own roles, no longer feeling squashed in the middle between their own manager and those who report to them.

When managers and supervisors operate in an environment of agency, they trust their teams to make the needed decisions at the correct levels and no longer intervene or make decisions "below their pay grade." Individuals and teams feel empowered to act decisively rather than delegate up out of fear of making a mistake. This allows leaders at every level to focus on their most important tasks:

» Creating the organizational "container" for success. That container—the mission, vision, values, and strategic direction—defines the boundaries for operating and identifies the goals.
» Connecting the organization dots so everyone knows who are their key partners for performance success: who to talk with, learn from, and problem solve with.
» Providing the needed coaching, mentoring, and feedback that team members need to grow and develop in their roles and beyond.

When the container is well-defined, the people within it can navigate needs and expectations with freedom, flexibility, and confidence, allowing them to apply the skills and capabilities for which they were hired to the challenges and opportunities that exist today and are on the horizon.

Creating Change: Partnering to Unleash Agency

Managers, leaders, and change agents can play a unique role in the process of creating a culture that unleashes agency at every level, educating themselves and others in understanding how agency is the next step on the journey for higher performance. In many ways, agency is a Dialogic OD process (Bushe & Marshak, 2015) in that it cannot be bestowed or pushed down the organization. In fact, to unleash agency requires new narratives and new mindsets regarding how individuals, teams, managers, and leaders work together to achieve organizational goals. The role of leaders, managers, and organization change agents is to support organizational members to envision an organization in which agency exists and is exerted at every level and to highlight the payoff for both the organization and individuals when people feel the freedom to re-claim their agency, or claim it for the first time.

We Need Agency—NOW!

These are challenging times for organizations. Transformations are happening every day and the rate of change is accelerating. Many people are still in a process of rethinking and transforming their expectations of themselves and how they live their lives inside and outside of work.

The best way to navigate this period of change is to tap and deploy the richness of everyone's abilities in our organizations and move to new ways of interacting and performing our work tasks and responsibilities. We need to continue to reinvent the workplace to one that enables people to have greater autonomy, authority, and leadership in every role. People want workplaces that recognize their humanity and fosters greater decision-making authority regarding their work and lives. We need every person in every role to be able to contribute and act freely. In short, we need agency, and we need it now.

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Judith H. Katz has distinguished herself as a thought leader, practitioner, and strategist. She is the recipient of the OD Network Lifetime Achievement award and one of 40 Pioneers of Diversity. With Frederick A. Miller, she has co-created many key concepts in Organization Development to create inclusive collaborative workplaces and achieve higher organizational performance, such as Interaction Safety and Conscious Actions for Inclusion. Her ground-breaking book, *White Awareness: Handbook for Anti-Racism Training* (1978), was the first systematic training program to address racism from a white perspective. Judith served on the boards of NTL Institute and Social Venture Network; and currently serves on the Fielding Graduate University Board. She can be reached at *judithkatz@kjcg.com*.

For more than fifty years, Fred and Judith have been working individually and together on organization and cultural transformation to create more inclusive and higher performing workplaces. The Kaleel Jamison Consulting Group was started in 1970 and then Judith joined the firm in 1985. KJCG was named one of *Consulting* magazine's Seven Small Jewels in 2010. Fred and Judith have partnered with Fortune 100 and other companies, universities, governmental agencies, municipalities, and nonprofit organizations to create organizations in which the level of interaction safety elevates the quality of interactions, leverages people's differences, and transforms workplaces into growth and learning environments where people's talents are unleashed, results are accelerated, and productivity soars. Their partnership is proof that teamwork and collaboration do create breakthroughs.