Empowerment Through Autonomy
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Imagine. You walk into work, and sit down in the morning meeting, maybe you have some coffee. Your NCOIC says "Good morning team we have a tasker for a project. Who wants it?" You raise your hand and offer to take care of the project. Then, you set up the meeting with the project manager, assemble a small team, organize the various elements that are needed to make the project happen and then execute those tasks. You trust that if you get stuck you can go to your leadership and ask for help. You trust that if you make a mistake your leadership has your back. Suddenly you're putting 100% of your effort into this project. It is *your* project. This is empowerment through autonomy.

Multiple studies have shown that autonomy leads to better morale, and job satisfaction. They also indicate that job satisfaction is directly related to productivity at work. In the above scenario you are empowered to make real time decisions regardless of your rank. You trust your leadership, and they empower you. You begin to see your work as a reflection of who you are as well as a reflection of your team. You own this project and you are setting the example for your peers.

The most important factor is trust. Autonomy isn't playing without a safety net or supervision. Instead it is trusting that it is safe to ask for help and make mistakes. It is trust that their leadership will not be overly critical, and they will be able to learn and grow from the mistake. An understanding that we are all human and that we all make mistakes is crucial for an autonomous team.

In contrast, the Airman who is assigned a task but doesn't know what it's for or why they are completing it, probably doesn't have much pride in their work. They don't own a project. They're just doing what they are told. The bigger picture is a blur to them and all they see is one meaningless detail. They are not empowered.

Applying autonomy within a team could be as simple as allowing lunches to be taken at leisure as opposed to a dedicated lunch hour or break schedule. Allowing team members to choose projects that inspire them will give their work meaning. Autonomy can be the difference between empowerment, and just going through the motions. It cultivates creative solutions to complex problems, and changes the culture within an organization for the better.