Motivating Teams: The Importance of ABC Needs





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Work is Evolving, Complex, & Uncertain

- Lots of change
- Work format shifts & leading distributed teams
- Persistent state of uncertainty (economic; geopolitical)
- AI and its role in work (humans + technology)



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The Great Detachment: 4 Themes

Jim Harter (August 5, 2025)

1. Organizational Culture: 32% describe their workplace as isolated or impersonal; lacking the conditions to help people feel connected to their teams
2. Leadership Transparency: 29% say they lack clear, honest, and consistent communication from their leaders
3. Resource Investment: 25% say their organizations underinvest in people, pay, tools, or staffing
4. Performance Management: 14% cite lack of feedback recognition, or development opportunities

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What Activates Motivation & Drive?

Deci, Ryan & Koestner (1999); Ariely et al. (2005); Amabile (2006); Dan Pink (2008)



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ABC Needs: The Gateway to Engagement, Performance, & Well-Being

Deci & Ryan (2000). American Psychologist 68-78

Autonomy (choice): Wanting to act with a sense of choice & volition; choosing to do something because it aligns with your values and goals

Belonging (connection): Feeling connected to others; like you are part of groups that are important and significant to you; feeling cared for by others; a sense of community

Challenge (growth): You feel like you're getting better at goals that matter to you; you feel effective in your work role; you want to master new skills

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ABC Needs & Performance Consequences

Gagne & Vansteenkiste (2013); Van den Broeck et al. (2016); Rouse et al. (2020); Deci & Ryan (2014); Goh, Pfeffer, & Zenios (2016)

- ABC Needs are essential nutrients for growth, performance, & well-being at work
- When ABC Needs are met: better job performance, decreased risk of burnout, stronger organizational commitment, & lower turnover
- When ABC Needs are not met: likelihood of depression increases, higher exhaustion, & higher turnover intention

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Autonomy Builders

THE NEED TO CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

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Expanding the Conversation – Different Types of Autonomy at Work

- Schedule autonomy – freedom to choose when/where I work
- Task autonomy – the degree of independence I have in deciding how to perform my job
- Decision-making autonomy – the authority I have in making decisions related to work
- Creative autonomy – I can experiment with new ideas and approaches
- Career autonomy – I can set my own career goals and pursue learning opportunities & skills development opportunities
- Social autonomy – We can choose how to communicate, collaborate, and build relationships with colleagues/clients/stakeholders

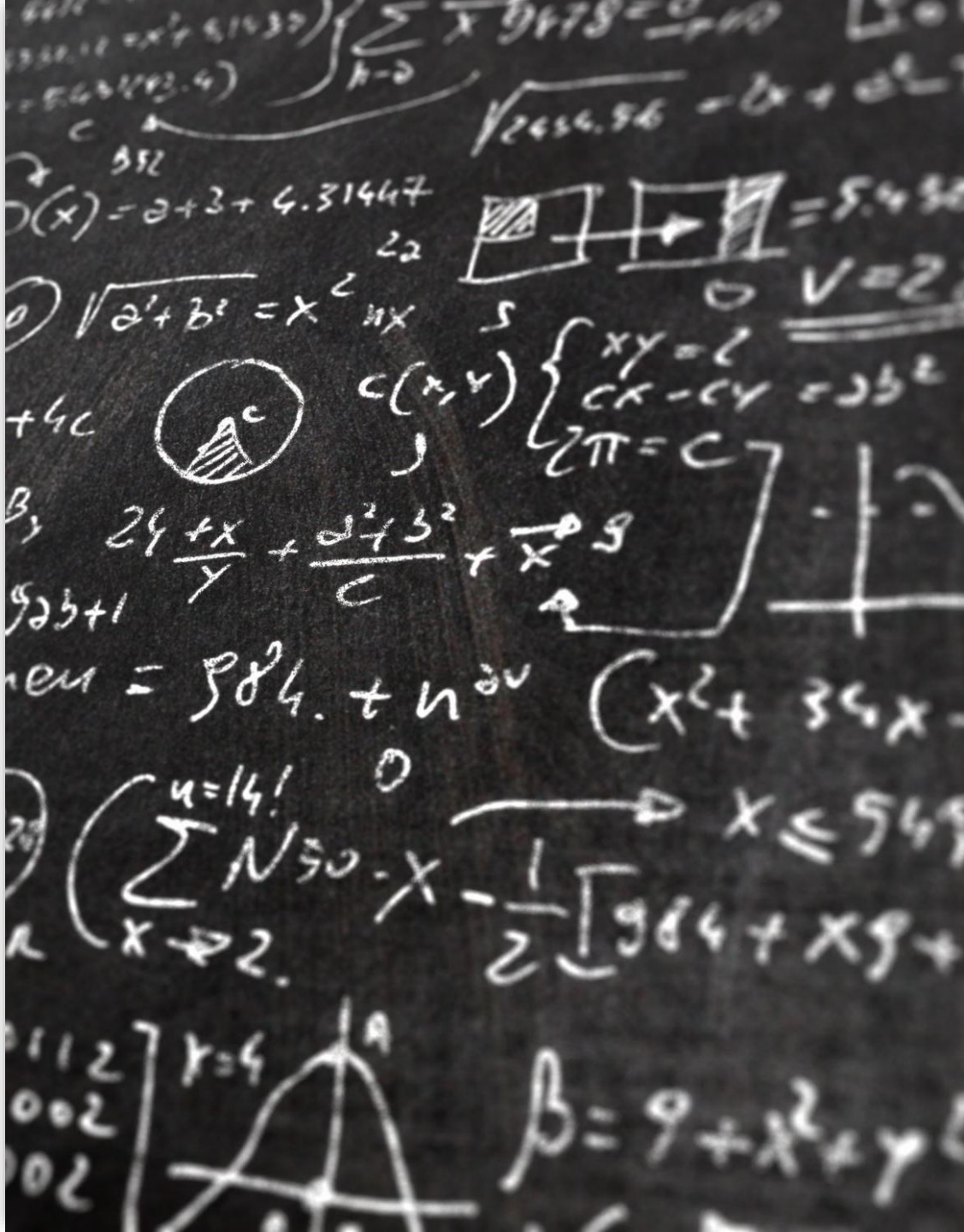
TNT: Give People Context

Frank Martela et al. 2021

Give a rationale, explanation, the strategic thinking, and/or back story for assignments, projects, and change

** Show your (mental) work

** This is a practice that also fosters meaningful work



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TNT: Provide Clarity When Delegating

Charlie Gilkey. 2023 Team Habits

01

What types of decisions do “others” have sole control to make?

(Level 1 Decisions)

02

What types of decisions can “others” make but must keep you in the loop?

(Level 2 Decisions)

03

What types of decisions are ”others” not allowed to make?

(Level 3 Decisions)

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TNT:
Provide Clear Guardrails

- Specify deadlines (e.g., send me your first draft by 6pm tomorrow)
- Start with the report we used for the last project
- Let’s check in on Friday
- Send me any questions you have by email

** This strategy also increases the “C”



Autonomy Nuances

It needs to be earned

You can have too much of it; match to level of experience

Micromanaging Shuts Down Autonomy

- It also damages psychological safety, making it more likely people will hide information
- A micromanaging mindset often stems from extreme stress, need to control, and high pressure

ASK:

- Have I been clear about expectations?
- Are these edits/changes/comments providing *real* help?
- Do I need to look inward?

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Questions for Discussion



When you assign work (or when work is assigned), what will "giving people context" look and sound like?



How does autonomy work in a manufacturing or non-corporate environment?



How do you address micromanaging?

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Build Belonging (Community)

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AI & Its Impact on Connection

Burlacu & Monahan (July 2025). Seth & Edmondson (Feb. 2026) HBR.

- 90% of workers see AI as a co-worker and 67% trust AI more than colleagues; 64% say they have a better relationship with AI than with their human teammates; and 54% say AI is more empathetic
- 85% of those most productive AI users report that they are more polite to AI than the people around them; 79% say AI is more polite to them
- AI can change team dynamics by introducing trust ambiguity

** We need to design work not only for new tech and workflows, but also for the broader interpersonal work experience (e.g., holiday parties, lunch and learns, retreats, eating meals together, volunteering, zoom coffees, happy hours)



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TNT: Connection Check-Ins

Questions from Dr. Zach Mercurio (2023); Adams, Myles, Clifton, & Mercurio (2023)



GOAL: Spend time with someone without a business/work outcome attached

** Leader → Direct Report

** Peer → Peer

Instead of (or in addition to) "how are you," ask:

1. What has your attention right now?
2. What kind of day have you had?
3. What do you need help with today/this week/short term?

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TNT: Hold Quarterly Conversation Days

Myles & Adams (2025). Meaningful Work



Designed around 3 key components & are more formal:

LOOK BACK: Discuss/reflect on top achievements & challenges from the past quarter

LOOK FORWARD: Discuss upcoming projects, tasks, & support requirements

CAREER DEVELOPMENT: Discuss how you can support professional growth (mentoring, stretch assignments, feedback)

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TNT: Active Constructive Responding
The Importance of Capitalizing on Small Wins

Dr. Shelly Gable et al. 2004; Dr. Karen Reivich; Ilies et al. 2023; Illes, Bono & Bakker (2024).



Active Constructive Responding	Active Destructive
JOY MULTIPLIER	JOY THIEF
Passive Constructive	Passive Destructive
FAUX LISTENING	RESPONSE SHIFTER

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Challenge & Growth Builders

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TNT: Give High-Quality Feedback Using The Thank You “Plus”

Carol Dweck (2006); Deloitte Workforce Well-Being Imperative (March 13, 2023)

- Think of a person you want to thank, recognize, or affirm
- Add the specific behavior/strength you noticed that led to the good outcome (the “why” or the “because”)
- Tell them the impact to you, the team, or the firm



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Build Challenge & Growth – Your TNTs Roadmap

Slemp et al. 2024



- Give people mastery experiences
- Provide feedback
- Provide guidance
- Share knowledge & expertise
- Establish clear & realistic expectations

PICK ONE TO FOCUS ON

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