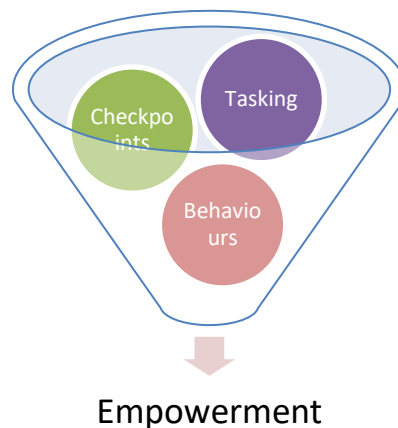


# Why do cars need brakes?

The obvious answer seems to be so they can stop, but the reason we have cars is to move, not to stay still. The real reason cars have brakes is so that they can move – both swiftly and safely.

When the subject of “empowerment” and “managerial control” comes up I use this metaphor to explain why these two things are not mutually exclusive. Organisations need to have appropriate control measures in place because those organisational “brakes” make it possible for employees to go fast. Where employees know that there are appropriate controls in place it promotes empowerment and the application of good judgement.

*Managers  
who have  
truly  
empowered  
employees  
working for  
them get  
three things  
right*



## How employees are tasked

Good tasking depends on

- Focussing on the output you want from the employee (not the steps that might be taken to achieve it)
- Making sure they know any “boundary conditions” which must be complied with - “You can do anything within reason as long as.....”
- Making sure that the employee is capable (in terms of skill, training and experience) of making the judgement calls that you are leaving to them, and then trusting them to do so

Managers still need to make a judgement on how much detailed control they need to exert depending on the circumstances. Like Baby Bears porridge in the Goldilocks fable (which was neither too hot nor too cold) the degree of detailed control exercised by the manager needs to be just right.



What do you need to consider when deciding how much detailed control is enough but not too much?



The best managers accept that there will be circumstances that require detailed control but are always looking for opportunities to safely allow employees to exercise more of their own judgment (to return to our metaphor they make sure the brakes are effective, they don't sit in the passenger seat pulling on the handbrake).

## Establish relevant checkpoints

Work progress should be checked at appropriate times - not randomly (we are not trying to "catch people out" here) and not just once the work is completed and it is too late to make any necessary corrections.

Checkpoints should meet some combination of the following conditions

- We have reached a point where we need to either *review the assumptions* we started with, or *choose between alternative* paths forward
- We have reached a point where we can *evaluate progress*, i.e. an interim step has been completed
- We need to *re-calibrate against progress of other teams* that we need to fit in with
- This is a significant decision point where we are facing a "*point of no return*". This doesn't mean the manager doesn't trust the employee, it simply means that they are not expecting them to always be perfect. At these checkpoints it may be someone other than the direct manager who conducts the review.

Checkpoints that meet these criteria will help employees feel in control. They are best discussed and agreed during the tasking process so that the rationale behind them is clearly understood.



## Behaviours

As well as *what* employees do, there also needs to be some control over *how* they do it. Behaviours of individuals must fall within boundaries that the organisation finds acceptable.

These acceptable behaviours are commonly called the “culture” or “the values” of the organisation.

A key distinction needs to be made here between the *stated* values of the organisation (the ones that are workshopped and printed on posters) and the *values in place* i.e. the rules that employees implicitly know and follow.

In some rare organisations the two are the same – in most organisations they are not or at best they overlap. The important ones are the values in place i.e. the real behaviours we adopt, not the ones we tell others are appropriate.

### How can Managers control Behaviours?

There are a number of things that influence behaviour in organisations, but managers have a strong influence over two of them.

1. How they behave themselves – not what they say about appropriate behaviours but what they actually do, particularly when they are under stress
2. Who gets punished or rewarded and for what. Reward and punishment are not simply about the size of bonuses (though that might come into it) but more nuanced things like who gets to meet important visitors, who is snubbed or listened to in meetings, who gets included or excluded in friendship groups etc.



Get this stuff right and you can have appropriate levels of control and empowered, motivated employees at the same time, your car will be both fast and safe as it navigates the bumps and turns of business.



So don't be shy about the need for appropriate controls in your organisation, but do make sure they are ones which help rather than hinder real empowerment.

Best Wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Gunzburg'.

**David Gunzburg**

**Director DGHR Services**

