Leadership without leaders: learning from Wikipedia

By **Helge Klapper**

From preschool on, almost none of us like to be told what to do. For the most part, too much direction tends to take the fun out of a task. Sooner or later, however, most of us accept some degree of supervision as an inevitable and necessary part of achieving a larger institutional goal. Yet, unfortunately, hierarchical supervision doesn't work all that well for most of us, particularly when the people in question are highly skilled, emotionally invested professionals.

A supervisor can order something done in a particular way, but often at the price of the employee's engagement and creativity. Subordinates who don't trust their superiors' judgment will tend to disengage.

Many managers struggle to direct and supervise without crushing their employees' motivation. More established firms can often partly offset the harmful effects of hierarchical supervision by giving employees bonuses and other financial incentives. However, this solution is not perfect, particularly for the most dedicated employees. A number of researchers have found that intrinsically motivated employees sometimes respond badly to financial incentives. There are also practical concerns: cash-strapped companies might lack sufficient resources to stoke their employees' enthusiasm.

However, now that the success of more and more firms depends on the ability of highly engaged and creative teams, many managers are looking for a solution to this old problem that goes beyond that familiar cash-for-compliance trade-off.

Wikipedia is one enterprise that appears to have found a different way. Founded in 2001, it is now the third-most visited website in the world, according to the Ahrefs traffic monitoring service, with more than 2.2 billion visits every month. Websites with similar levels of traffic are routinely valued at billions of dollars

Yet despite its scale, the non-profit online encyclopedia is written, edited, and run entirely by volunteers. In any given month, more than 130,000 volunteers are busy expanding and improving the site, which now contains 52 million articles in 309 languages. Those 130,000 writers are supervised by 1,000 administrators – also volunteers – who resolve problems and adjudicate editorial disputes as they arise.

In a traditional organisation, 1,000 administrators could not possibly supervise the work of 130,000 people (particularly given that they lack any of the usual carrots and sticks of corporate life) but this non-profit organisation has worked out a model that keeps the site growing and improving without alienating too many of its article writers.

How does Wikipedia do it? As an innovation management scholar with an interest in organisational design, I thought the answer to this question would be not only interesting in its own right, but also useful to managers looking for a way to maintain their employees' enthusiasm while keeping them focused on achieving the firm's larger goal.

Normally, it would be extremely difficult to understand the managerial dynamics of such a large enterprise as Wikipedia, but several aspects of its structure make it easier. First, all the work is entirely online and decentralised. Second, there is an extremely clear division between users who have additional rights, eg, restrict editing access to pages or block users, and those who don't. Such distinctions don't exist in many analogous organisations, such as crowd-sourced software groups. Finally, Wikipedia is a highly transparent entity. ▶

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Reviewing 642,916 article-discussion pages logged between 2002 and 2014 gave us an unusual opportunity to make a quantitative assessment of how this organisation's unusual administrative process functions.

In order to investigate whether users appreciate the intervention by admins, ie, whether they "like being told what to do", we calculate their monthly activity in terms of entries. The more they write, we argue, the more they are engaged and motivated. Then we check whether users increase or decrease their overall activity after they have been told by an admin what to do.

Specifically, we look at page restrictions. Here, admins can stop users from editing a page, because that page has been repeatedly vandalised or is very controversial (think of Donald Trumps' Wikipedia page). So, if after being told to stop working on a page, users increase their effort on all other pages, we argue that this intervention increased their motivation. (Note: technically, it is a bit more complicated, as we use a difference-in-difference technique and compare the activities of the users who have experienced interventions with comparable users who have not.)

Winning factors

Our analysis uncovered a number of factors that have made Wikipedia's restricted management system work. To begin with, the relationship between writers and admins is deliberately non-hierarchical. Founder Jimmy Wales and his co-founders designed the system in such a way that the admins take care of various editorial duties with respect

to the article but lack any direct power over the writer.

This division of authority is an important element in the Wikipedia system. A number of studies have shown that people often find this kind of lateral authority less demotivating to motivated workers than direct hierarchical authority.

However, the impact of their actions was less pronounced with experienced contributors. Our review of those pages found that writers who were newer to Wikipedia tended to be more receptive to the admin's suggestions, particularly when the admin was an expert in a particular field. The longer writers had been involved, the less attention they paid.

Admin interventions tended to be better received when the authors perceived the admin as competent. People responded better when they saw the admin more as a neutral and capable arbitrator than as a traditional, hierarchical leader.

about how an article should be written, intervention by admins was highly appreciated. For example, the page on *Zwarte Piet* ("Black Pete"), the Dutch version of Santa's helper, might become very controversial as editors try to describe the historic and current aspects of the tradition. An admin intervening here can be seen as very helpful, as they enable editors to focus on less problematic pages.

Make your next move lateral

Can an organisation co-ordinate and direct its employees without demotivating them? The experience of Wikipedia suggests it is possible, provided you restrict the authority of supervisors to enforcing mechanical standards and arbitrating decisions – and if those supervisors can exercise that authority on a lateral rather than a hierarchical basis; that is, through a focus on completing a task rather than on the performance of individuals.

tended to help resolve co-ordination conflicts among intrinsically motivated staff – for example, in skunk works, in crowdsourcing processes, and in pressure groups. Our results suggest too that companies such as Zappos, the online shoe merchant, which operated for a long time as what leaders describe as a holocracy – a largely management-free organisation – might improve their efficiency by clarifying more of the decision rights of different team members' roles.

For managers in an organisation with many largely autonomous and intrinsically motivated employees, the Wikipedia model might also be worth considering, particularly if you lack the resources to encourage people with bonuses and other monetary rewards. Strategists trying to drive disruptive innovation might also want to look at this model, in order to predict the conditions under which an enterprise designed for the collective production of public goods might serve as a paradigm for management practices private business. ■

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Finally, the thornier the problem, the more contributors seemed willing to defer to the judgment of a referee. When the conflict between editors escalated and they could not agree

Despite being obtained in the context of a not-for-profit entity, these results appear generalisable to many corporate settings where managerial authority is restricted in ways in-