Integrated ~ Autonomy

Idea In Short

When an organization argues about standardization versus flexibility, reframe the discussion around where each is needed. Integrated ~ Autonomy helps participants identify activities that require central coordination, local discretion, or a deliberate combination of both. Invite people who understand the work from both central and local positions. Have them map current tensions, generate options that strengthen integration and autonomy together, and choose a few to test. The output should be a practical operating change with an owner and review date, not a slogan about balance. Use the structure when the issue is genuinely a both-and design challenge; it will not resolve a conflict whose real cause is unclear authority or missing resources.

A regional service team may need consistent customer standards while adapting to different local laws, languages, or operating conditions. One response is to impose a single process everywhere; another is to let each location decide independently. Both can create costs: rigid rules can ignore local knowledge, while unconstrained variation can fragment the service. Integrated ~ Autonomy helps a group investigate this tension as a design question. It asks where central integration is useful, where local autonomy is necessary, and what actions could strengthen both. The practice enacts the Liberating Structures principle “Amplify Freedom and Responsibility” by making interdependence visible while allowing people close to the work to contribute.

Name the real tension

The session begins with examples of activities in which central coordination and local discretion pull in different directions. Participants might identify policy interpretation, hiring, product configuration, customer support, or data reporting. The facilitator should keep examples concrete. “We need more flexibility” is difficult to act on; “local teams need to adjust appointment hours while reporting service levels in a common format” describes a design problem with elements that can be examined.

The official sequence starts with individual reflection, then invites participants to combine their lists in pairs or trios. Small groups select one activity and identify actions that would increase integration and actions that would preserve or expand autonomy. The source guide allocates about 70 minutes overall, including a substantial period for generating combined options. This staged process matters because the first proposal is often an either-or solution shaped by a person's role. The group needs time to see how each position protects something valuable.

Treat the poles as design material

Integration can mean shared goals, common interfaces, comparable information, or a clear minimum standard. Autonomy can mean discretion over timing, local adaptation, or authority to respond to a customer without waiting for central permission. The group should specify what each term means in its own setting. Otherwise participants may agree on abstract labels while imagining different practices.

Once the activity is clear, participants generate options for increasing integration and options for increasing autonomy. They then ask how to increase both together. A useful option might establish a common outcome and a small set of non-negotiable safeguards, while allowing local teams to choose the workflow that achieves them. Another might create a shared repository for lessons from local experiments, so each unit can adapt and the organization can learn. These are design possibilities, not universal prescriptions. The right combination depends on the work and the consequences of variation.

Include both perspectives

The participant mix affects whether the proposals can be implemented. People who set standards need to understand the conditions that make local exceptions necessary. People who execute locally need to see the dependencies that make shared coordination valuable. Invite both, as well as those affected by the activity. A conversation made up only of central planners may produce elegant rules that fail in practice; a conversation made up only of local teams may overlook risks that emerge across the system.

The structure uses an individual-to-small-group-to-whole-group progression. This gives participants time to think independently before they negotiate common options. In a remote session, the host can use breakout groups and a digital version of the template. Make the

working space visible to everyone, and ask groups to record the assumptions behind each option. This helps the plenary compare proposals on the same terms instead of relying on memory or rhetoric.

Choose an experiment, not a slogan

After generating combined options, participants prioritize the most promising actions. A proposal such as “empower local teams” is not yet a workable experiment. A more testable version names what decisions local teams may make, which outcomes remain common, what information is shared, and when the arrangement will be reviewed. The group should assign an owner who can convene the relevant people and remove practical barriers. If the proposal crosses several functions, name the decision maker and the contributors explicitly.

A review date turns a proposed balance into a learning cycle. Ask what evidence would show that integration improved, and what evidence would show that autonomy was preserved. For example, a team could track handoff delays and the number of local exceptions that required escalation. The measures should reflect the purpose of the work, not merely what is easiest to count. If the trial reduces delay but creates inconsistent customer outcomes, the design may need adjustment. If common reporting improves while teams lose discretion to respond to local conditions, the group has not achieved both aims.

Know when another conversation is needed

Integrated ~ Autonomy assumes that participants can explore options together. It is not a substitute for resolving a basic authority question. If two leaders each believe they own a decision, the organization may first need to clarify accountability. A lack of staffing or technology can also constrain choices in ways a workshop cannot remove. The facilitator should make these conditions visible instead of treating every impasse as a failure of imagination.

The practice is useful during operating-model changes, integration after a merger, global-local policy design, and the redesign of professional standards. It can also help leaders examine where a rule protects an important outcome and where it creates unnecessary friction. Research on organizational ambidexterity describes the management challenge of sustaining exploration and exploitation; studies of decentralization and decision rights also show why authority should match information and accountability. 1, 2, 3

The purpose is not to find a perfect midpoint. Some activities need tighter integration; others depend on local judgment. The group's work is to make those choices explicit, design a practical arrangement, and learn from its consequences. A well-framed experiment can replace recurring arguments with evidence about where coordination helps, where discretion matters, and what the organization should change next.

- 1Strategic agility
- 2The ambidextrous organization
- 3Decentralization and decision rights

Summary

The practice gives teams a way to move beyond a fixed choice between consistency and adaptation. Participants first name where the tension appears, then design specific actions that improve coordination while leaving room for local knowledge. Strong options usually clarify what must be shared and what can be adapted, along with who decides and how learning travels. The facilitator should invite people close to the work and people responsible for wider coherence, then help the group select one change to test. A review date matters because a proposed balance is a hypothesis. The organization can learn from its effects and refine the arrangement rather than treating the first design as permanent.