In every organisation and every team within the organisation there’s a vast resource that lies largely untapped.

Those two polar extremes are usually fairly easy to pick. It’s great to have one and often inordinately demanding having to cope with the other.

But perhaps the most informative finding of the survey was that 76 percent of people exhibited only moderate commitment and neither went to great lengths to shirk work or take on responsibility. This “ambivalent three-quarters” indicates fertile ground for development and productivity improvements, but also for increasing employee satisfaction – something that can feed further discretionary effort and help reduce turnover.

**Encouraging extra effort**

Before trying to simply “get” more from people – demanding, coercing or driving – it’s useful to identify what might encourage them to voluntarily contribute even more than can be simply demanded or coerced. One place to start can be by identifying what it is that people want from their work.

Another study by the Corporate Leadership Council found that the most important aspect of work was a “quality manager”. It bears out the old adage that the number one reason people leave a job is the same as the number one reason they choose to stay: their boss.

So what does a “quality manager” look like? Leadership Management Australia’s Leadership and Employment and Direction Survey found the five most important factors for positively influencing employees are:

1. Being entrusted with responsibility/independence
2. Interesting and challenging work
3. A good working relationship
4. Receiving feedback and good communication
5. Enjoying a good relationship with other staff.

None of which is particularly unreasonable. In fact, anyone reading this article would probably personally attest to the importance of these factors when thinking about those who manage them.

Our needs are not that complicated. These are the things we can give to others that can encourage a reciprocal giving of effort.

**Creating the environment**

Of course, there are always limitations and challenges to providing, for example, “interesting and challenging work” and to entrusting people with responsibility or allowing greater independence. Sometimes their demonstrated ability or confidence is simply not adequate to justify the autonomy they might desire. But of course that becomes an issue for “receiving feedback...
and good communication” – they’re not likely to improve their readiness for greater responsibility without the opportunity to improve.

Good working relationships with peers and managers are built over time as a result of consistent experiences that express support and integrity – again, not unreasonable.

“In a survey, 76 percent of employees exhibited only moderate commitment to their organisation. This indicates fertile ground for development and productivity improvements.

So, intentionally, consistently and consciously meeting some basic needs like feedback, communication and relationship helps establish an environment in which additional effort is more likely to be given and in which more responsibility can be delegated with greater confidence.

Organisational structures necessarily limit people’s authority – their power – to ensure clarity, accountability and order. But it’s not hard to see that those structures, policies and procedures can often impede people’s efforts to exercise initiative or go the extra mile. They can also often silently communicate a lack of trust. That’s one reason responsibility and autonomy are so valued – they are empowering. We understand rules and processes are necessary but we also realise that they communicate something about our perceived “maturity”; if we’re subject to a rule that says someone else has to make a decision it means we’re not seen as being capable. No one likes being treated as if they are incompetent.

Sometimes discretionary effort can be achieved simply by removing a barrier – like shifting decision making on feedback is sought and provided, with honesty and follow-up action, cannot help but create healthier environments where ideas can be floated, acknowledged, tested and adapted. Actively looking for and talking about ways to increase people’s responsibility and remove barriers to autonomy communicates its own support and positive reinforcement as well as encouraging and modelling a collaborative approach.

Such actions are, of course, largely discretionary on the part of the leader.

They involve choice, decision and initiative. They may sit outside measurable performance criteria. They take time and effort. They may also be among the most important things you can do.

The tragedy and missed opportunity of the “ambivalent three-quarters” in the workforce can only be addressed by the discretionary effort of workplace leaders. While there will always be those who choose mediocrity, there’s little doubt our commitment to encouraging discretionary effort will be significantly reflected in the effort that is extended in return.

The opportunity and challenge of discretionary effort might have been captured neatly by the great Michelangelo, who is reputed to have once said that the greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it.”