



Five Critical Skills for Team Leadership

How is Managing a Department Different from Leading a Team?

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In today's environment, higher education institutions are turning more frequently to project management to help them implement their critical projects. A key component of project management involves forming teams around the specific goals of a project. Effective leaders are needed for these teams.

This article is Part 1 in a three-part series that covers five critical skills needed for effectively leading teams, especially those related to projects. In the remaining parts in the series, we will cover in more detail each of the five critical skills.

Managing a Department vs. Leading a Team – Is There a Difference?

Much has been written about the differences between leadership and management. Leaders lead people. Managers manage tasks. There is a clear difference.

This difference is even more significant when comparing managing a department to leading a team, especially a team with members from other departments or divisions.

More and more institutions are using cross-functional teams for special initiatives or major projects like campus-wide technology implementations, accreditation, or strategic planning efforts. These teams require effective leadership.

Both managing a department and leading a team involve the following skills and activities:

- Providing direction and leadership to others
- Planning
- Meeting goals and objectives
- Managing activities/tasks
- Working with people

The key difference lies in the responsibility for performance management.

Typically, managers are responsible for managing the performance of the people in their departments. The manager hires, conducts performance reviews, and provides coaching and counseling if necessary to improve employee performance.

Team leaders, on the other hand, are responsible for leading teams of people who may not report to them. Without organizational authority, team leaders must influence others and inspire them to meet the goals of the initiative or project.

Creating a Positive Team Climate & Influencing Others

To effectively influence team members, team leaders must create a positive climate in which people on the team feel motivated to complete the required tasks. Team members need to feel they are being heard, they are appreciated, and they are truly part of the team. Creating this positive climate involves key skills that help team leaders earn the respect of their team members.

Five Critical Team Leadership Skills

Following are five critical team leadership skills that will help team leaders (and managers) effectively influence and demonstrate respect for their team members.



- Understanding behavioral styles
- Listening and effectively communicating
- Giving praise
- Handling criticism
- Using problem-solving and persuasion instead of criticism

Each of these critical team leadership skills builds upon the other. Recognizing behavior helps team leaders more effectively listen and respond to team members. Giving praise and effectively accepting criticism helps team leaders earn respect. Involving people using a problem solving style helps engage them and demonstrates respect for their knowledge and experience. Finally, using problem-solving and persuasion instead of criticism helps team leaders positively influence others' behavior.

Creating a positive team climate is an effective way to build trust on cross-functional teams. Team members who trust each other and their leader are more effective in meeting their goals.

1. Understanding Behavioral Styles

Understanding behavior and behavioral styles helps team leaders more effectively lead their teams. Behavior refers to peoples' actions and reactions – both verbal and non-verbal. Behavior is what can be seen or heard by others, and behavior usually invokes some sort of reaction from other people.

Different behaviors cause different types of reactions. For example, one person may react angrily and verbally attack an angry person who is yelling at them. While another person may respond to that same angry behavior by retreating and becoming submissive and apologetic.

Understanding this concept is important for team leaders, because their behavior – verbal and non-verbal – will impact the behaviors of members of their teams.

For example, what would happen if you shared the following comment with a team member: “Your attitude in our meetings is awful.” The team member might react defensively, become angry, or verbally attack. The statement comes across as a judgment.

On the other hand, if you shared a comment like the following: “You have been quieter than normal in our meetings recently,” the reaction might be quite different. In this situation, you are citing behavior – what you see or hear the person doing or not doing. This more objective comment would probably lead to more open conversation about the situation.

Understanding the behavioral styles of others allows team leaders to more effectively interact with other people.

To read more about behavioral styles and on how to understand and use them to more effectively lead and manage people, please see the following articles in our Library:

[Leadership Styles for Dealing with People: Part 1- Identifying Your Personal Style in Dealing with People](#)

[Leadership Styles for Dealing with People: Part 2- Putting Effective Leader Styles to Work for You](#)

2. Listening & Effectively Communicating

To quote leadership expert Stephen R. Covey, "Seek first to understand, then be understood." This principle is key to effective interpersonal communication and can make or break success in leadership, teams, and other relationships.

Covey’s statement seems like such a simple concept. In reality, we all struggle with effectively listening to others. If we think of the characteristics of poor listeners, chances are all of those characteristics can apply to each of us at one time or another. Listening is a skill. It can be learned and should be practiced.



The skill of listening is important in all aspects of our life and especially when leading a team. When you listen to another person, you demonstrate respect for that person. As Henry David Thoreau said, "The greatest compliment ever paid me was when one asked me what I thought and attended to my answer."

Effective listening means actively listening and involves working to overcome many of the barriers to listening by asking questions, removing distractions, and listening with the intent to report.

3. Giving Praise

No matter how busy you are, you must take time to make the other person feel important.
~ Mary Kay Ash

Sometimes the simplest positive actions toward your team members can have a powerful impact on the cohesiveness of the team and in demonstrating and earning respect.

Following are five simple tips for giving effective praise to your team members.

1. **Be specific.** Blanket praise does not communicate what was done to deserve the praise, and it may come across as insincere. Often vague praise comes across as an "at-a boy" without substance.
2. **Be genuine and share how the behavior made you feel.** People always know when someone is genuine usually through their words, tone, or body language.
3. **Be immediate and timely.** If you wait too long to share the praise, it loses its impact and gives the impression you did not have the time earlier to thank the person.
4. **Don't mix praise with criticism.** Mixing criticism and praise only leaves confusion in the mind of the person you are trying to praise.
5. **Don't overuse praise.** Overused praise becomes meaningless and loses its effectiveness.

4. Handling Criticism

Mark Twain says it best, "I like criticism, but it must be my way." None of us like to receive criticism. Our immediate reaction is to become defensive or deny the criticism.

As a result, we often do not hear what someone may be saying to us. We are too busy thinking about how we're going to respond instead of really hearing what the person is trying to tell us. The criticism may hold an element of truth that could help us grow as individuals if we were not so defensive. In addition, our image would improve if we could be in control during times of conflict and confrontation that often comes with criticism.



Effectively handling criticism involves two critical skills: 1) absorbing the criticism and 2) clarifying the criticism.

Absorbing criticism. The basic technique for handling conflict and criticism is the ability to absorb criticism without becoming defensive or angry. This technique involves using words that acknowledge the other person's point of view and accepting that it might be true under certain circumstances, but without necessarily accepting it as true.

Clarifying Criticism. One of the best techniques for coping with criticism involves asking questions that put the burden on the criticizer to clarify what he/she means. This tool is the most difficult, and yet most powerful for dealing with criticism.

5. Using Problem Solving and Persuasion Instead of Criticism

Most people respond defensively when receiving criticism. They may act hurt, blame others, make excuses, or even deny the criticism. They may also become angry and aggressive. Finally, they may psychologically withdraw.

Criticism is an attempt to influence someone to change their behavior. Constructive criticism can provide positive results including the following:

- Enhancing job results
- Ongoing personal and professional development
- Reducing stress and creating psychological security
- Improving interpersonal relationships
- Developing the ideal organizational climate for teamwork

Two effective approaches to giving criticism include the problem-solving approach and the persuasion approach.

The problem-solving approach is the first approach to use when providing criticism to team members. The emphasis is on solving the problem by getting the team member involved, listening to their views, and depersonalizing the criticism.

When using the persuasion approach, a team leader would have already tried working through a situation using the problem-solving approach. The team leader does more talking than listening and appeals to the person's interest or desire. Using this approach shows understanding of the person's concerns and issues and stresses the potential positive outcomes.

Managing vs. Leading

Many of the same interpersonal skills are necessary to effectively manage a department or lead a team. However, leading a team without the performance authority requires the abilities to influence others, demonstrate and receive respect, and create a positive climate of trust. These five skills discussed in this article can help you be both a better manager and a stronger team leader. In the next part in this series, we will focus on listening and effectively communicating to more successfully lead and manage people.

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