

What Kind of Team Leader are You?

By Stephen C. Rafe



Here are the hallmarks of a good team leader and keys to put them to use.

As a team leader, you're responsible for your group's success in fulfilling organizational objectives. You've been selected to head a particular function or activity for one or more reasons—perhaps because of your knowledge, experience, or functional skills. Or maybe your colleagues have chosen you because they feel you'll fulfill their expectations of a good leader.

How will you do in this position? It depends on how much thought you put into the role. Keep these keys in mind:

Understand Your Role

Without a good team, a leader can't function, and without a good leader, a team can't function. So, it takes a particular set of skills and attributes to head a successful team—some of which may not be expected in your day-to-day management activities.

As the team's leader, you have a high level of responsibility and accountability. You also have the opportunity to contribute to the organization's success in ways far beyond what your routine activities might provide. The level of success your team achieves will largely depend upon how well you're able to mesh members':

- **understanding** of the task
- **ambitions** and expectations
- **ability** to maximize one another's knowledge and skills.

“It takes a particular set of skills to head a team.”

Approach the Task Thoughtfully

Put time, thought, and care into the following pieces of the leadership task:

- **Review the organization's vision and mission statements** together.
- **Compare those statements** with the team's assignment.
- **Consider how the team's task** fits into the organization's global view.
- **Ensure that team members know** how the team's function contributes to the organization's objectives.
- **Create a plan for achieving the team's goals. Use it to guide you** in establishing the team's pace, tone, and character so that they agree with the organization's culture.

Earn the Team's Respect with These Five Steps

It's important that you gain the respect of all your team members from the start. Your level of success in doing so depends on how well you perform these five tasks:

“ Good communicators spend at least 50% of their time listening, ”

1. HELP THE TEAM PLAN.

Start the planning process by considering how the team's job fits into the larger goals of the organization as a whole. Then bring the rest of the team along on the journey by doing the following:

- **Give team members an overview of the big picture** so that their tasks have higher value.
- **Take an active role in helping team members anticipate their future**, set clear objectives, and develop a plan that will get them there.
- **Guide the team in breaking objectives into manageable tasks.** Ensure that tasks are appropriate to the level at which the team has been asked to function.
- **Identify members' interests and the satisfaction they might gain** from each task.
- **Decide who is best suited** to take on each task.
- **Help team members set timetables, schedule meetings, and adapt themselves to change** as it occurs.
- **Be sure everyone's actions are consistent** with the team's and organization's long-term and short-term expectations and objectives.
- **Schedule time with individual team members** to ensure that everyone is fulfilling the team's expectations. Use these meetings to listen to members' input in detail from all angles so that you'll know whether to stay on the same path or shift gears.

2. HELP PEOPLE DEFINE THEMSELVES AS A UNIT.

If your plans are to succeed, you must emphasize to members how important it is for them to become a strong team working for the good of all. They must learn to be one unit rather than a collection of individuals. Doing so will simplify everyone's tasks, reduce time spent, and provide an environment where stress won't impede progress.

Teams function best when members focus on specific objectives and build consensus within their area of responsibility. Help build team spirit by showing a sincere interest in the group's work, contributing to its ideas, and supporting its decisions.

3. MOTIVATE TEAM MEMBERS SO THEY'LL WANT TO SUCCEED.

Your motivational skills will be needed in two areas:

- **keeping the team** connected as a unit
- **keeping individual members** focused on the team's assignment.

The more you can inspire participants to *want* to be on the team, the less they'll think about *having* to be on it. Help them see their role as one of opportunity rather than drudgery.

In part, this means treating team members like volunteers who are free to leave at any time. Even though they may not be able to quit without losing their jobs, they can "quit" in other ways. They can procrastinate or stall progress. They can sabotage by doing their tasks poorly. They can even complain to higher management.

So, avoid using forceful methods such as threats and ultimatums. Instead, learn what they, as individuals, personally want or expect

from the team experience and do everything you can to address those wants and needs. Learn which of the three "primary drives" (netmba.com/mgmt/ob/motivation/mcclelland) are likely to be the most important to each member:

- **leadership:** the opportunity to be in charge
- **achievement:** the chance to do something well at a high level of quality
- **affiliation:** the ability to "socialize" in a task-driven environment.

Once you know which one(s) motivate your team members, you can provide opportunities and recognition accordingly. Overall, you can also watch for and capitalize on ways to reinforce members' desire to be proud of the organization and team. You can do this, in particular, by emphasizing the service aspect of the team's work.

4. ADAPT YOUR STYLE TO THE GROUP'S NEEDS.

As a person, you're unique. You have specific technical, managerial, administrative, and creative skills that you can apply to help your team succeed. You also have your own leadership style.

To the extent that your style fulfills the needs and preferences of the team and its members, you'll be successful. However, if your style needs some fine-tuning, you'll have the best chance of success if you low-key the aspects that could get in the way.

Team leaders are most effective when they strike a balance between two styles of leadership:

- **Behavioral leadership** reflects an ability to shift among a number of styles and techniques according to what the situation requires.
- **Fellowship** reflects an ability to work well with others and help them get along well with their colleagues.

No matter what your style may be, keep in mind that every good leader needs the ability, willingness, and desire to do the following:

- **Examine, question, and even challenge the status quo** when the situation calls for it.
- **Work with the team to formulate, establish, maintain, and enforce standards** for the good of the group.
- **Do as you expect others to do.** Serve as a role model for all that's important to the team and its members.
- **Help others express their feelings and beliefs in a safe environment** free from threats, intimidation, and ridicule.
- **Show concern for others** in all aspects of everything you do.

5. COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY.

Your communication skills will bring to life everything you've read so far. Good communicators spend at least 50% of their time listening, 30% helping others express their views more clearly, and only about 10% of their time telling others what they think, what to do, or how to do it (other than while summing up and moving the plan forward).

A good leader listens "*care-fully*"—that is, fully and with care. For example:

- **Let your words, voice tones, body language, and facial expression communicate** that you're ready to listen.
- **Show patience as people express themselves** no matter how long it takes them—and regardless of the importance or priority you may assign to the subject.
- **Take an extra minute** to listen well—especially in situations of conflict or potential conflict—and you may make the difference between a member who contributes enthusiastically and one who just "serves time."

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- **Provide feedback** that shows you're really listening, not just daydreaming, rehearsing your response, wandering mentally, or pretending to listen.
- **When you don't understand the message, the point, the intention, or the concern**, ask questions to encourage further input.
- **Help others believe that your intent** is to discover, learn, or benefit from them in some constructive way. Be sure that your words, tone, body language, and facial expressions are open and non-threatening.
- **Earn trust by remaining non-defensive** and non-judgmental to whatever people say.
- **When asked to take actions or positions, agree only** to what you're comfortable delivering and can perform appropriately.
- **Go out of your way to provide members with scheduled and informal opportunities** to give you input. They'll be more eager to listen to you once you've listened to them.

As both a communicator and a leader, practice setting aside emotions that others might perceive as negative. At the same time, allow others to express their emotions without feeling threatened yourself. As in all things that are worth doing well, effective communication starts and ends with a positive attitude that expresses your good intentions and fosters the same in others.


Put the Pieces in Place

As you put the practices of team leadership to use, keep these formulas in mind:

KNOW YOUR E-S-P

Enthusiasm, Sincerity, and Poise are the traits you need to present to your team. You'll be able to do so with ease if you know yourself, your assignment, and the components of each situation.

CONSIDER THE SEVEN CS

Express *caring*. Show *concern*. Be *considerate*. Demonstrate *confidence*, and help others do the same. Support and encourage *creativity*. Guide people to improve their *competency* in all avenues. Treat others with *courtesy* above all else. These are the hallmarks of a good team leader. 

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