

It's Not About You: Leading Thriving Teams ¹

Jeff Oltmann

Why do some teams thrive in the real-world messiness of projects, deadlines, and change? Recently, I joined the [Profiles in Leadership podcast](#) to talk about it. One theme kept surfacing: effective leadership is less about being the smartest person in the room and more about enabling others to do their best work.

The theme of leading by enabling others shapes the way I work, teach, and consult. Whether I'm working with a PMO, a project team, or a management team, I see that the most effective leaders focus on creating the right conditions for their team. It's not about them – it's about their people.

Here are a few of the ideas I shared during the conversation and some practical ways you can apply them.

Enable Others

The phrase “servant leadership” has become a buzzword, but the concept is solid. Your best leadership is not about you. It's when you create an environment where others can do their best work. Here are some ways you can create it.



Remove roadblocks
before they get in the
way

Clarify priorities

Use your hard-won
experience to coach
and teach others

Make people feel safe
enough to learn,
innovate, and
sometimes even make
mistakes

Balance high
standards and
accountability with
strong support

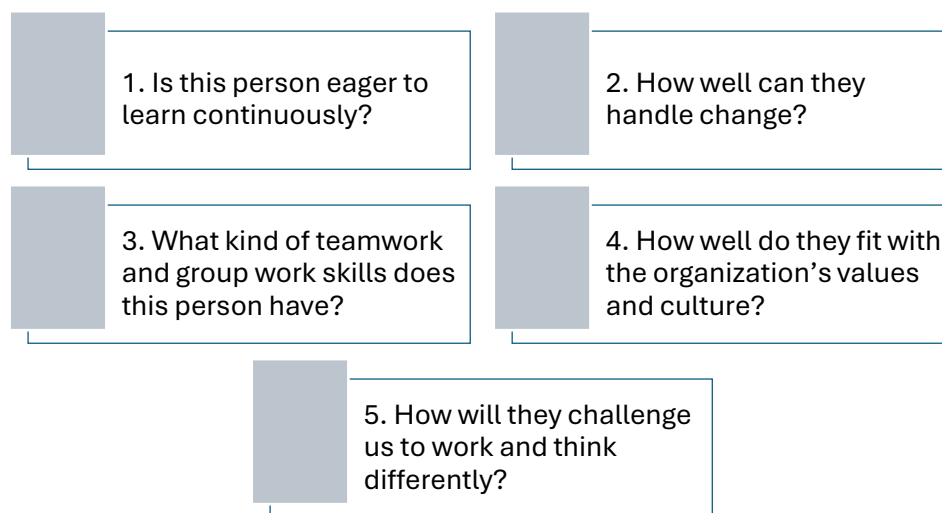
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Build a Band

Leadership means building teams that can solve complex problems *together*. Don't focus on finding a flashy soloist when you're creating a new team or hiring a new employee. Look for someone who can play in the band as well as solo. Of course, individual skills and subject matter expertise are always important, but even the most talented individual will fall short without a functioning team.



When building a team or hiring a new employee, I ask these questions to probe beyond subject expertise.



Semper Gumby

Systems thinking is crucial to solving tough problems. I was trained as an engineer, so I bring an engineering mindset to my work. I like systems, lean process, and practical solutions. But I've learned flexibility is just as important. One of my guiding phrases is "*Semper Gumby*" — always be flexible.



As a leader, do enough planning to be able to give direction to your teams, but don't over-plan. The world changes. Projects shift. Your leadership must be flexible, too.

Bottom line: thriving teams drive real results

Thriving people are the engine of thriving projects. To deliver lasting results, build your team carefully and support your people. Your most important contribution as a leader may not be a decision or a deliverable. It may be the environment you create.

Ask yourself what kind of environment you are creating for your team. I'd love to hear what works for you.

I teach and consult about highly effective projects, portfolios, and teams. You can contact me at jeff@spspro.com and read more at spspro.com/blog.

About the Author



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Jeff Oltmann is a seasoned leader with over 30 years of experience advising clients, managing successful technology programs, and developing new products. His specialties include strategy deployment, operational and project excellence, and project portfolio management. As principal consultant at Synergy Professional Services, Jeff advises leaders and teams in diverse sectors including healthcare, research, bioscience, and technology product development.

Jeff is the founder of the Portfolio and Project Leaders Forum. He is also on the graduate faculty of the Division of Management at Oregon Health and Science University and was previously on executive staff at IBM. He teaches portfolio, program, and project management and is a certified Project Management Professional (PMP®).

Jeff welcomes your questions and ideas. You can contact him at jeff@spspro.com or read previous articles at www.spspro.com/article-library.