The Project Leader as Coach [1]

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The world needs strong, competent Project Leaders, now more than ever (PMI, 2025). Government and industry both desperately require effective Project Leaders, in addition to volunteers leading effectively in communities and civic organizations. Within PMI, the difference between a successful Chapter and an unsuccessful one is the quality of its volunteer leadership. One is not a born leader. Rather, leadership is a learned skill and honed through experience by facing challenges and learning from both failures and successes.

The school of hard knocks may be a great teacher; however, the project team will achieve outstanding performance with the proper coach. In the words of Bo Schembechler, the great U of M Football Coach, "It's the Team, the Team, the Team" (Schembechler, 2007). The Project Leader as Coach is critical to take their Team from good to great (Collins, 2001).

This article will discuss the dictum of the Project Leader as the guiding force to help achieve superb team and project results; that is, the Project Leader serving as Coach.

The Ecumenical Norms of Leadership

The evaluation of a Project Leader is a function of their team's results, not their individual efforts. To achieve the requisite project goals, the Project Leader must do what is necessary to help their teams succeed. Key project leadership norms include:

1. Provide clear directions by articulating the project mission, vision, values, goals, and plans.
2. Foster collaboration through team building, delegation, coaching, and using a service leadership mantra.
3. Motivate team members to achieve by providing feedback, support, and recognition, and by ethically resolving conflict.

These leadership norms form the basis of Coaching (Schembechler, 2007).

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The Rudiments of Coaching

Coaching is the process of guiding and encouraging team members to achieve superior performance results. The Coach needs to collaborate *with* the team members to help them improve, and not brow beat and work against them. The Project Leader's role as a Coach is to ensure their project team members meticulously plan and execute their assignments, improve their performance, and reach their full potential (Kouzes & Posner, 2010).

To perform effectively, project team members need to know their expected performance, including:

- *What* they are supposed to do [PROJECT PLAN].
- *Why* they are supposed to do it [PROJECT GOALS].
- *How* they are supposed to do it [PROJECT EXECUTION].
- *How well* they are expected to do it [PROJECT OUTCOMES].
- *How well* they are doing [PROJECT CONTROL].

Assuring the team members meet these expectations becomes the responsibility of the Project Leader as Coach (Toastmasters International, 2016).

The Project Leader's Responsibilities as a Coach

A Project Leader's coaching responsibility is to provide their team members with the direction and feedback they need. Specifically, acting as a coach, the Project Leader performs the following (Rubenstein, 2020):

- Sets high but achievable expectations.
- Guides team members.
- Offers support and advice.
- Provides feedback.
- Encourages team members.

The Project Leader's prime leadership responsibility as Coach is to *Coach*; and conversely, their critical coaching responsibility as Project Leader, to *Lead*. That is, the Project Leader directs their Team to exceptional performance through their coaching acumen (Wooden & Jamison, 2005).

The Phases of Project Coaching for Exceptional Team Performance

Ideally, the project team will execute the project work efficiently, with each team member performing their assignments flawlessly, and progressing without incident toward the requisite project outcomes. In these utopian circumstances, the Project Leader will praise the team and specific members for exceptional results and encourage the team to continue to excel.

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However, realism will set in. Realistically, teams will not consistently perform perfectly. Besides, perfection is not humanly possible. If the project team regularly outperforms the stated expectations, then the project requirements have been set too low. The Project Leader serves as the Head Coach of the Project Team, guiding each team member to perform exceptionally well.

The Project Coaching Phases (Frame, 1995) follow this scenario with their Team:

> ***Phase 1. Monitor Execution of Team Performance*.** The Project Leader compares their project team's performance with the expected outcomes for the review period, identify where the project output is not meeting the expected benchmarks, and speculates on the reason/s for the sub-par performance.
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> ***Phase 2. Analysis of Teamwork Results*.** The Project Leader must involve their team in the assessment process in determining the cause/s for the sub-par performance. Direct, non-confrontational meetings work best. If the problem is within the control of the team, the Project Leader should allow their teammates to explain the problem as they see it, and the effect it has on the team and its goals. The Project Leader may have their suspicions but could very well be wrong about the causes. At times, the problem may be the Project Leader themselves. The Project Leader as Coach must actively listen to their team
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> ***Phase 3. Set Corrective Action with Team*.** When the Project Leader and the team concur with the specific problem/s and underlying reason/s for the sub-par performance, they are able to develop a workable solution together. The jointly developed solution should identify the actions to be taken by both the Project Leader and the specific team members to resolve the problems and negate the underlying causes.
>
> **Phase 4. *Solution Implementation with Team***. The Project Leader must follow through with their team, ensuring that the corrective solution resolves the performance problem and the team members are back on track toward excellence.

Coaching and Coaxing the Team

In the coaching discussions with their team, the Project Leader must always exhibit empathy and understanding. The Project Leader's coaching interactions will be more effective when they avoid making the team members defensive. The Project Leader must take the following coaching tactics (Canterucci, 2005):

- Talk with, not down to, the team.
- Admit one's mistakes, openly and honestly.
- Keep it simple, direct and specific.

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- Listen without interruptions or reservations.
- Be sincere and genuine.
- Be timely in addressing issues, don't procrastinate.

The Benefits of Effective Coaching

The Project Leader personally benefits from effective coaching. Team productivity improves, the project is accomplished according to the defined plans and specifications, and, they will have more time for other project responsibilities. As their coaching skills improve, the Project Leader will experience better job satisfaction and personal fulfillment for their efforts (Wooden & Jamison, 2005).

Effective coaching is a team effort between the Project Leader and their team, which results in improved performance. The benefits of collaborative coaching between the Project Leader and Team include (Toastmasters International, 2016):

- High Team Morale. When everyone is working together and achieving goals, the team members feel good about their work and themselves.
- Empowerment. The team members feel confident and willingly accept more responsibility.
- Development. Team members learn and improve. As they grow, they become more creative and are able to contribute even more.

Conclusion

The Project Leader has a professional duty to ensure they do everything possible to improve the performance of their team. Few things motivate people more than praise or help from a leader. As a coach, the Project Leader can always show their team how they can help themselves, and how they can help their organization improve its overall performance (Lutz, 2013).

If you wish to discuss this topic in more detail, please feel free to contact me at William.moylan@emich.edu

Best regards,

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