

The Manager as Leader, Coach, and Enabler

BY JONATHAN BABCOCK

The best managers provide a sense of why their team's work is important. By enabling and supporting their work, managers ensure team members can more fully contribute.

In today's data- and deadline-driven world, managers can be tempted — if not incentivized — to focus time and effort on the process and mechanics of moving work through the production pipeline. Meanwhile, they may neglect the “softer” people side of management and its accompanying opportunities to drive performance by developing and motivating individuals and teams.

Attention to three often overlooked or misinterpreted roles of management — those of leader, coach, and enabler — can strengthen teams and

organizations, while resulting in greater satisfaction and fulfillment for both manager and team member.

MANAGER AS LEADER

The manager as leader strives to help his team achieve a sense of why they do what they do, why it is important, and why it is personally worthwhile. Perhaps the most basic and necessary responsibility a manager has is to give team members something to work on. The manager as leader strives for the higher standard of providing an ideal to work toward. While the difference may

sound like word play, it is much more. The way people think and feel about their work influences quality, and the enthusiasm and satisfaction with which they do it.

First, the manager as leader must have a vision of how things could be, a vivid mental image of a worthwhile and desirable future that lends purpose and direction to his actions and decisions. Through consistent behavior, encouragement, and gentle persuasion, the leader communicates the vision to team members, helping them sense its value to themselves, and the criticality of



their roles in making it a reality. Team members who come to share the leader's vision feel a shared sense of ownership and responsibility from seeing it through. Thus, an individual leader's vision becomes a shared vision.

A shared vision can serve as a powerful unifier and motivator, aligning and focusing teams and their efforts. By contrast, a lack of vision may result in uninspired and mediocre work. Simon Sinek illustrates this point with his version of the timeless parable of the stonemasons as related in "Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action."

You walk up to the first stonemason and ask, "Do you like your job?" He looks up at you and replies, "I've been building this wall for as long as I can remember. The work is monotonous. I work in the scorching hot sun all day. The stones are heavy and lifting them day after day can be backbreaking. I'm not even sure if this project will be completed in my lifetime. But it's a job. It pays the bills." You thank him for his time and walk on.

About 30 feet away, you walk up to a second stonemason. You ask him the same question, "Do you like your job?" He looks up and replies, "I love my job. I'm building a cathedral. Sure, I've been working on this wall for as long as I can remember, and yes,

the work is sometimes monotonous. I work in the scorching hot sun all day. The stones are heavy and lifting them day after day can be backbreaking. I'm not even sure if this project will be completed in my lifetime. But I'm building a cathedral."

While the two stonemasons were performing the exact same task within earshot of one another, the second had a sense of why he was doing what he did and how it fit into a larger, grander purpose — the vision. The first, with a more limited perspective, was content to go through the motions, doing the minimum required, instead of putting full heart and effort into his work. What made the two so different? The second worker may be an all-world bricklayer or eternal optimist. Perhaps the first is lazy or inept. Or it could be that the first only needs help seeing the big picture. That's where the manager's role as leader can make a real and lasting difference.

When a group comes to share a vision that resonates with its aspirations and values, and to see how its efforts are instrumental in making that vision a reality, a mind shift begins in earnest. Inspired work replaces uninspired box-checking. Creativity and innovation begin to flourish. Team members begin to recognize how each piece of the jigsaw puzzle — including the piece they provide — is instrumental in reaching a desired end. While the nature of the work performed

does not change, the shift in perspective changes everything in terms of motivation, quality of work, and job satisfaction. Team members are no longer content to simply "do their jobs," but to find better ways to achieve a shared vision — to build a cathedral.

DEFINING THE VISION

These questions may aid managers and teams in defining a vision and guiding principles:

- What is our team's "cathedral"?
- What is (or will be) the team's "claim to fame"?
- How does our team provide value to the organization?
- What organizational problems are we uniquely qualified to help solve?
- How will we, as a team, define success?

MANAGER AS COACH

The manager as coach is an extension of the leader role, focusing inwardly on the leadership of a team. He or she is responsible for assembling a balanced team, instilling guiding principles and frameworks for execution, and developing the talents and abilities of each team member.



ASSEMBLE A BALANCED TEAM

The manager as coach understands that, much like high-performing sports teams, the best teams in the industry have a diverse, but complementary set of skills and abilities. Instead of relying on a rote job description, the manager as coach seeks to understand his team's strengths and weaknesses, and takes care to address areas of opportunity or weakness, even if that search takes him off conventional paths.

Rarely will a manager be able to find (or afford) to hire a full team of experienced experts in the team's functional domain, with deep understanding of the business and technology context, and great interpersonal/soft skills. The manager as coach seeks candidates to bring strength to areas where the team is lacking, even if not a textbook fit, according to the traditional job description. The manager as coach may then provide opportunities for team members to share experiences, to job-shadow, or cross-train in order to propagate ideas and expertise to round out the rough edges of the team's capabilities and competencies.

INSTILL SOUND PRINCIPLES, OR 'PRINCIPLES OVER PRESCRIPTIONS'

A good coach acknowledges that even the best laid plans require adaptation and adjustment once competition begins. Rather than introducing prescriptive, cookie-cutter approaches, and methodologies with the expectation of standard output for standard effort, he instills sound, guiding principles, and frameworks, then trusts team members to make judgment calls consistent with those principles.

Formal training is the tip of the professional development iceberg.

10%

of learning and development comes from courses and reading.

20%

comes from others, largely feedback from supervisors.

70%

comes from experiential learning: learning by doing or "stretch" assignments.

Lombardo, Michael M.; Eichinger, Robert W. (1996). *The Career Architect Development Planner* (1st ed.). Minneapolis: Lominger. p. iv.

By giving team members freedom, within the looser bounds of principles and frameworks, to take initiative in applying their skills situationally, the coach enables each team member to learn and grow by thinking and doing. The resulting sense of ownership and accomplishment gives team members confidence and opens opportunities for creativity and innovation. On the other hand, overly prescriptive environments aren't as instructive; team members incentivized to "check the box" will become very good at checking the box, but miss out on valuable growth opportunities.

DEVELOP TALENTS AND ABILITIES

The manager as coach acknowledges that professional development is personal, and while the manager has a key part to play,

growth and development are primarily driven by the individual. Rather than trying to identify the perfect training opportunity to suit the varying needs and interests of the team collectively (difficult, at best), the coach works with each individual to identify personal development goals and plans to meet them. The coach understands that his role is to provide guidance, feedback, and accountability for efforts to reach development goals.

The manager as coach understands that formal training, while important, only contributes a small portion of an individual's overall professional growth and development. Many of the best professional development opportunities do not require formal training. This can be a liberating concept — or a wake-up call — to the manager who feels overly constrained by budget limitations to provide quality professional development opportunities.

One of the most valuable things a coach can provide is regular and constructive feedback in near real-time (or as close to it as is feasible). Timely feedback enables team members to quickly adjust their performance and overcome past weaknesses. Additionally, managers may provide opportunities for team members to improve knowledge and skills throughout the normal course of business activities. A few examples include:

- "Training moments." Team-member-led presentations and reports at team meetings.
- Guest speakers at team meetings. May be from other areas of the business or external invitees.

- Job shadowing and buddy programs.
- Book clubs. Team members agree to read and discuss books of interest.
- Finding books and blogs pertaining to professional interests, and participating in discussion forums and social media.
- Communities of practice for competency groups.
- Assignments to write and present articles and white papers on completed projects and accomplishments.
- Participation in professional networking groups.
- Perhaps the most valuable thing a manager can do for team members' professional development is to provide challenging, even "stretch" assignments that push them beyond their known abilities, and enable them to discover opportunities for growth and development in a safe, supportive environment.

MANAGER AS ENABLER

The enabler role is also an extension of the leadership role with an outward focus on leadership external to the team. The leader as enabler carries the team's vision to the rest of the organization, and serves as its chief advocate and ambassador. The enabler strives to build bridges of cooperation and goodwill with other teams and stakeholders, while removing barriers to success.

BUILD BRIDGES

The enabler strives to build the stature and reputation of the team within the organization by creating

cooperative and, ideally, synergistic relationships with the team's stakeholders and peer groups.

Examples of the enabler's bridge-building role include:

- Seeking feedback from those who depend on the team's work to learn how the team could improve to better meet the needs of the direct consumers of his team's work — whether they are internal or external customers.
- Building relationships with peer managers and identifying holistic approaches to solving problems, rather than focusing introspectively on his team's corner of the organization.
- Ensuring the organization's leadership knows about team victories and accomplishments, how the team provides value, and individual performers with high potential.
- Ensuring the organization provides a path of progression for team members who seek continued excellence and growth within the organization.

REMOVE BARRIERS

The barrier-removing aspect of the enabler role may include:

- Seeking feedback from the team on impediments — whether structural or process-related — to high performance and driving solutions to completion.
- Removing physical, process, or political barriers preventing the team from effectively engaging with peers and stakeholders within the organization.

In summary, professionals want to feel they are empowered to do their best work, and that their work serves a meaningful purpose. By considering the people side of management, including the roles of leader, coach, and enabler, managers provide a sense of why the work the team does is important. Instead of acting primarily as a taskmaster, the manager plays an enabling and supportive role. With motivated individuals who share a vision, and have freedom to adapt, innovate, and improve how work is done, the sky is the limit for what can be accomplished.



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