

Leading Your New Team: Dealing with the challenges of being the outsider

Richard C. Harris, PhD

February 2009

The world of work is team-based. R&D teams compete with other R&D teams to produce scientific breakthroughs. Marketing teams work to create more innovative products and approaches to customers. Sales teams have replaced the individual sales rep, motivated solely by quota. Even assembly lines are broken into teams to take advantage of synergies and dispel boredom.

The rise of the team based organisation has had a profound impact on the role of manager, making the manager not just an overseer of work, but a leader of teams. In this expanded role, there are many opportunities for the manager to make a significant impact. These opportunities include getting more done through increased worker flexibility, using team member engagement for creative problem solving, and channeling competitive energy to focus on external opportunities. In short, the team leader has the opportunity to take advantage of the intangible team dynamics which can make the difference between success and mediocre performance.

Think sports. At the beginning of each season, the manager has a roster of highly competent individual athletes. As the season progresses, the winning teams are not necessarily the ones with the best individual athletes. And by the end of the season, it is the teams which play the best together that win the most championships.

The comparison to sport is also relevant for another reason. In sport each year a small but visible number of managers join new clubs. When they do, they enter an environment in which the core of the team already exists. A similar situation exists in most business environments. In

Leading a New Team? Five Lessons from Experience

1. Get Grounded
2. Build Shared Vision
3. Don't Wait for the Master Plan
4. Address Difficult Relationships
5. Celebrate Success

both situations new team leaders share a common challenge: how do they provide the direction that they have been hired to give the team whilst simultaneously motivating the team to perform? Too little direction and the team can degrade to a set of individuals each pursuing unaligned agendas. Too much direction, and team members may revert to dysfunctional behaviours ranging from passive compliance to outright rebellion.

In short, the new team leader needs to earn the right to lead the team. In the words of one team leader, 'Neglecting the shared history of the team and/or assuming it was all "bad" before I got here is a terribly arrogant/insensitive mistake to make.' In a more positive vein, there is an emerging consensus of how to successfully assume leadership of a team which can be summarised in a set of Five Lessons.

Lesson 1: Get Grounded

Being appointed as the head of a team is an expression of senior management's confidence that you can get results. However, smart team leaders know that when they have been *appointed* to lead a team, they have not been *anointed* to lead the team. They still need to make a realistic assessment of the team's prospects and convert that into a vision which will motivate the team. They also know that no matter what assessment they make, there are certain organisational expectations for performance which already exist. They are serving two masters: the *team* needs to be motivated, and *management's* goals need to be met.

To get grounded you have to answer three questions:

1. What do the key stakeholders of this team (including the members) care most about?
2. Where does the work of this team fit into my immediate supervisor's priorities?
3. What is the strategic contribution that this team can make to the wider organisation?

The best way to answer these questions is to talk to people. Engage your boss with direct questions about his view of the big picture, his priorities, and his immediate expectations for the team. Also, find out from peers and colleagues what the reputation of this team is: are people looking forward to working with your team, or are they on guard? Finally, poll your own team members about their insights about the team and its priorities.

The process of getting grounded should help you get more focused on your priorities. It should also be the basis for getting the support of other stakeholders.

Lesson 2: Build shared vision

Much has been written about the importance of vision in leadership. Unfortunately some of it is misleading. For example, we seem to have confused having vision with having vision statements, turning efforts to clarify vision into editing exercises which are unsatisfactory for both the team leader and the team members. Alternatively, some leaders are led to believe that the only way to create shared vision is through some expansive consensus exercise which starts with a blank sheet of paper.

The practical reality is that if you take the time to get grounded, you cannot help but come away with a view of the future—a vision. The challenge is not to create a vision. The vision will emerge from the process of getting grounded. The challenge is to build ownership in your vision.

The team leader's role in building shared vision is to help resolve a classic management paradox: a good team leader will develop her own vision of what is possible; at the same time, people tend to own what they create. Is the only solution to do one or the other? The way to resolve this paradox is not through clever word-smithing. Instead the best way to resolve it is through dialogue. Dialogue enables conflicting points of view to be explored so that a shared direction that all team members can support is created. This is the key difference between *writing* a vision and *creating* a vision. It only takes one person to write a vision, but it takes the ability to discuss different points of view openly to create a vision that is owned by the team as a whole.

Lesson 3: Don't wait for the master plan

Getting properly grounded and creating shared vision require investments in time. But team leaders need to start making decisions from the first day on the job. In fact, there are often pending decisions that have been delayed with the departure of the prior team leader. You may not be able to be overly rational in a situation where immediate action is needed. This is no time for your perfectionist tendencies to take over. It will be more important for you to act than it will for you to be 100% right. You'll get a few things wrong along the way, but in the early days, people will also be willing to cut you some slack.

Find something that seems to be of concern to a critical mass of your stakeholders and do something about it. This gives them immediate confidence that you will act in their interest. In a surprising number of cases the decisions that are creating the most angst are not all that significant. But when action isn't taken, what is objectively insignificant can often fester.

Lesson 4: Deal Directly and Discretely with Difficult Relationships

Not all members of your team will be happy to see you as their new team leader. For all team members a new team leader is a source of uncertainty, even fear. Will the new team leader's approach be a dramatic change from the past? How will past team accomplishments be viewed? Engaging each member of the team and building shared vision helps dispel a lot of this uncertainty. However, there is still the possibility that difficult relationship issues may be bubbling under the surface.

It is not uncommon, for example, for at least one person in the team to resent not being appointed to your position. Others may have heard of you and have already formed a negative impression without even having met you. (Why don't rumour mills put out positive rumours?) Still others may have fundamental disagreements with the direction in which you want to take the team.

There are usually an unlimited number of reasons for not confronting these situations directly. But the number one reason for taking quick action is that they rarely resolve themselves by being ignored. In fact when relationship issues are ignored, they usually get worse.

In many cases a private word with the individual describing your observations and asking for their perspective is enough to resolve the situation. Occasionally more dramatic action, such as reassignment or termination, is needed. Naturally dramatic action should be reserved for extreme situations, especially if you will need your management's support to carry it off. But it is an option.

Lesson 5: Celebrate Success

The vision for your group should create shared meaning for all team members. But your work is not done when people are aligned with your vision. You have only just begun. There are targets to be set—and met.

The drumbeat of continuous improvement, or as one auto manufacturer likes to say, "the relentless pursuit of perfection" is music to a customer's ears. This same mentality, however, when used as a management mantra, can burn your people out. So it is important for their mental health to know when they have done a good job—and to know that you know they have done a good job. Don't be afraid to tell people. It won't make them lazy and it will give you a chance to reinforce the fact that the vision which you have developed is actually producing results. People like to work for a winner.

Another important part of celebrating success is letting the wider organisation know what the team has accomplished. This type of outward communication has two benefits. First, it raises the profile of your team, and in an era of diminished budgets, you don't want your team's

potential to be lost in the background. Secondly, it raises the confidence of team members in your leadership: not only are you recognising the team for its performance, you are using your stature to stand up for the team in ways that they can't.

Taking on the leadership of a team has many parallels in other management situations—a new CEO has 100 Days to make an imprint; a new department head has to get grounded, create shared vision, build a track record of success. The lessons in this article can apply in many different situations. However, the team leader role is unique in that it is much more of an influence role than leadership roles in the formal structure. As an influence-based leader, the team leader relies on open communication, relationships, and perhaps most importantly, the energy and commitment of the team. By applying these lessons, team leaders not only help their teams achieve a higher level of performance; they broaden their leadership capacity, which can prepare them for more traditional positions in the hierarchy as well.

Dr Richard C Harris is a management consultant in private practice in Boston, USA, as well as a senior advisor to The Chaos Game, Ltd. and its clients. He is a former Managing Director of Forum UK in London and was previously Senior Vice President in charge of Global Research for The Forum Corporation in Boston. The Chaos Game is a UK-based consultancy which specialises in helping leaders improve their personal performance in order to have a greater impact in their organisations.