

By Jason Hiner

If you want to succeed as a leader, you can only do it by setting up your team members to succeed. Here are a few fundamental leadership tips for managing your team to peak performance. Keep in mind that these tips are aimed at leaders who manage knowledge workers and project managers in IT. The equation can be a little different if you are managing people in a strict production environment, although many of the principles may still apply.

1 Focus on results and productivity and not the time clock

When you manage salaried knowledge workers, you should almost never have rigid clock-in/clock-out times unless there is a coverage issue in relation to serving customers (e.g., maintaining adequate help desk coverage during call hours). Instead, set clear goals that you know should take your employees about 40 hours/week to accomplish. Require that they show up on time for important meetings and are available during the team's general working hours. Provide them with the tools to access their work remotely, when needed. Then let them manage their own time. This sends the message that you trust your employees. If you've got people you don't trust, that's another issue. Manage them up until you do trust them or manage them out to their next opportunity.

2 Align people with the stuff they are good at

Make sure you have the right people in the right seats. This is especially true if you take over the management of a team that is already in place. Take stock of all the talents you have on the team and reshuffle the deck if it means that your team has a better chance of success. Don't keep someone in a job role just because they've been doing it for long time if you truly think their talents are better suited and could make a bigger contribution in another role. Employees might be reluctant to move in a case like this, so you may need to work hard to convince them that the change is in their best interest, as well as the best interest of the company.

3 Align people with the projects they are passionate about

Another part of getting people in the right seats is finding what your employees are genuinely passionate about and seeing if you can align them with job roles that let them channel some of that passion. Occasionally, that can mean putting someone in an area where they don't have much experience. But if their previous work history makes you think they can succeed in that role, it's usually worth it because their passion will fuel a strong desire to learn and grow. Once they're up to speed, that passion can become a strong driver of innovation and growth.

4 Put your best performers on your biggest opportunities

When you have a big opportunity that could propel your organization forward, you need to step back and think about who is the best person to lead the charge. In addition to finding someone who has the talent for the work involved or who has a passion for the subject matter, you need to look at who has a track record of success. Big opportunities come around only once in a while, and they can be lost. So even if it means taking someone off something important, you should always put your best performers on your biggest opportunities.

5 Find the balance between aggressive and realistic goals

Create a culture of performance by setting aggressive goals and holding your employees accountable for regularly reporting on their progress. However, the goals can't be so aggressive that your employees quickly fall behind and feel like they can never realistically achieve them. Otherwise, they will quit stretching to reach the goals. That means that you have to regularly re-evaluate the goals (at least on a quarterly basis) to decide whether they need to be scaled down or scaled up.

6 Trust your people—and let them know it

Knowledge workers typically have jobs that require creative solutions and decision-making. They need to stay sharp mentally to achieve top performance. The onus is on management to create an atmosphere that fosters and encourages that kind of creativity. One of the best things you can do is to let your employees know that you trust them and that you have faith in their ability to do the job, solve the problem, and/or meet the deadline. If you don't trust them, again, you need to manage them up or manage them out.

7 Avoid blame (a.k.a. throwing people under the bus)

In any business (or organizational enterprise), there are going to be times when you fail, and there will be things that simply don't pan out the way you had hoped. Do a post-mortem (even if it's informal) to figure out what went wrong and learn from it. If there were egregious errors made by individuals, deal with them privately. If necessary, let the person know your expectations for how this should be handled in the future. Don't publicly blame individuals—either directly or indirectly—in meetings or team e-mails. If you do, you risk creating an atmosphere in which people are so afraid to make mistakes that they don't spend enough time doing the proactive and creative work necessary to avoid future problems—or more important, to drive new innovations.

8 Foster innovation by killing projects the right way

Another important part of fostering innovation is knowing how to kill projects effectively and gracefully. There are times when failed initiatives will expose the weaknesses of certain employees, but there are plenty of times when you have good employees working on projects that simply don't pan out. Figuring out the difference between those two scenarios is part of becoming a good manager. If it's a good person on a bad project, the person who was running the project isn't any less talented because the project didn't materialize. So make sure you use the project as a learning experience and reassign the person to something new without excessive hand-wringing. Otherwise, you will make your employees overly risk-averse, and they will be reluctant to jump into the next big project or to make bold moves when managing the project. That type of atmosphere can quickly stifle progress.

9 Don't provide all the answers—make your employees think

You are the manager. You are the leader. That does *not* mean that you have a monopoly on all of the good ideas. If your employees are hesitant to make decisions without asking your opinion first, you haven't properly empowered them. If your employees aren't making enough of their own decisions, you should change your tactics. When they present you with information and ask what to do about a situation, push the ball back into their court and ask them, "What do you think?" They might be surprised at first, but after you do that several times, they'll start thinking it through before they come to you so that they're fully prepared to discuss the matter and make a recommendation. That's a good thing, because they're usually closer to the customer and more familiar with the details of the work. You need their opinions. And you need them to make some of their own decisions.

10 Build consensus by letting people know "why"

One of your key responsibilities in management is communicating about new initiatives and strategy changes. The worst thing you can do is surprise your staff members with a fully formed idea about a new way to do something that will drastically alter their day-to-day work. When you spring it on them, people will naturally be defensive and skeptical. Whenever possible, give people an informal heads-up that a change is coming and let them know some of the reasoning involved. They will be glad you kept them in the loop. If they don't agree with the reasoning, they can express their dissent. They might even bring up a caveat or a gotcha that should be considered before the final plan is solidified. An even better course of action is to have a brainstorming session with your team when you are still formulating a new idea or strategy change, so you can gather their ideas and feedback. You may sometimes have to spring something on your team, but make sure that you limit those occasions. Even then, take the time to let them know the reasoning behind the decision.



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Version history

Version: 1.0

Published: May 1, 2007

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