

Career Path: Leading a Team

Career Development



I have learned a lot about leadership during my career. There are four things that every project or team leader should focus on: (1) Choosing the team; (2) Setting objectives that advance the organization’s goal; (3) Assisting the team in meeting those goals; and (4) Recognizing, rewarding, or changing the team based on its performance. The most important task is building your diverse and inclusive team, which will be covered in depth in future columns.

For now, assume you have that team in place. The next most important focus is the team’s objectives. In the legal area, I have found it invaluable to develop an annually updated Strategic Long Range Plan. Take the company’s objectives and create legal strategies and tactics to advance each goal. This will resemble a tree: Each specific company goal will have a series of legal strategies branching off from it, and each strategy will have legal tactics to advance that strategy. At the tactical level, you should assign responsibilities, with a time for completion, down to the individual (these then are populated into their objectives). Thus, when a team member is working on a particular matter, they know how that task fits into a strategy that promotes a company objective.

For example, at US WEST, our desire was to expand into deregulated communications and information delivery, including entry into cable transportation services. At the time, telecommunications companies were prohibited from providing cable video services. We created a legal strategy with specific tactics to declare the law unconstitutional because it violated the right to free speech. We won and this decision opened new markets and opportunities for US WEST to compete with cable and broadcast companies on equal footing.

With the strategies in place, set clear observable and measurable objectives. If you ask your team members to do “good work,” you will probably grade them a “B” at best because you never defined what “good work” means. One of the most important things I’ve learned as a leader is when I give my employees 10 specific objectives — even if they are stretch goals — they will actually accomplish them all, plus several more. If you don’t measure it, you don’t get it. Sol Trujillo, my CEO at US WEST, asked me to change the degree of regulation of our business from essentially 90 percent regulated to 30 percent regulated in five years. At the time, I thought this was impossible. Yet, working with my team and with a clear objective, we developed and pursued innovative legal and public policy strategies and tactics. And we got it done!

Regular and honest feedback on employee performance is critical. Keep in mind the “how” is just as important as the “what.” Direct, tough conversations about performance require special attention. When having a serious performance conversation, create a one-page document with the key points you want to convey as “bullets.” Hand it to the employee and explain that you are communicating both verbally and in writing to ensure absolute clarity. This documents the conversation, provides clarity, and it won’t allow you to back down from what you really want to communicate (we often become wimps during difficult face-to-face conversations).

Honest performance reviews are the only way your employees can make reasoned decisions about their future lives and careers. Usually, they won’t agree with your assessment, but they should know where they stand. Most people have a high opinion of themselves — it is hard to imagine that 50 percent of any organization really believe they are below average. It is unfair for someone late in their career to find out for the first time where they stand, which is often part of a reduction in force.

Don’t underestimate the value of positive reinforcement. We often focus on correcting errors rather than highlighting and rewarding a job well done. Never hesitate to recognize actions that develop value. I personally handwrite cards to each employee who receives any special recognition, bonus, or promotion. It’s specific to their accomplishments, and the note reinforces the values we want to develop and reward. If the outcome was based on teamwork, diversity, collaboration, innovation, etc., I point it out. And it’s not just for direct reports. When Roger Crandall, our MassMutual CEO, takes a tough public stand on issues, such as he has on LGBT rights, I let him know I appreciate it. I encourage others to communicate the same.

Keeping a non-performer around can be a destructive action for your team. When I worked at Pacific Northwest Bell, we had an attorney who was performing poorly, coming in late, and leaving early — and everyone knew. Plus, this attorney probably made double what I made! The general counsel may have felt he was being nice to him by not making the tough decisions to let him go. But the general counsel’s failure to do what was right had a significant negative impact on the rest of the team. Teams respect their leaders when they make the tough people decisions.

All individuals develop relationships as you work and learn together. As a leader, take the time to listen to the personal challenges of your team members (we all have them) and share yours. Truly — share yours. I continue to be surprised how a personal issue can deeply affect a team member. But I can only help if I know about it. Don’t underestimate the power of emotion. Be aware of it, recognize it, and value it in others. But, because it is so important and powerful, use it carefully as a leader.

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