



AIA Best Practices: Leading and coaching high-performance teams

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Summary

Find out how the best leaders and project managers in architecture deliver high-quality work and create opportunities for team members to thrive.

Introduction

The most challenging aspect of project management is the human element. The best project managers not only deliver profitable, high-quality projects on schedule but also create opportunities for co-workers to grow and improve in their careers. They know that the people they work with are central to achieving their project goals.

Yet the idea of building and coaching a team is not often found in project management literature, but rather in books for executives and firm leaders. This seems shortsighted, especially since the day-to-day experiences gained while working on projects are the stuff upon which knowledge and careers are built. A key differentiator between good and great team leaders is their ability to create opportunities for growth and learning. Therefore, it is crucial that managers consider growth and development of their team as part of their role.

At the same time, project managers need the backing and support of the firm at large if these aspects of mentoring and career growth are to be implemented at the project level for all staff. Managers need training, project teams need to know that their growth will be considered and included in planning and staffing decisions, and firm leaders must believe and clearly communicate the message that professional development is an important part of project delivery. A firm with a “profit-only” view of project success will never be able to successfully implement this broader vision.

Personalities and performance

There is abundant information about personality types and their impact on work relationships and teams. The design professions are full of smart, accomplished, confident people, and in the essay “How to Manage Smart People,” author and project manager Scott Berkun provides great insights about how to work with them as a team and be an effective leader. As Berkun writes:

"A manager, at any level of hierarchy ... has an emotional responsibility to [his or her] reports... A manager sets the tone for dialog (open and thoughtful or defensive and confrontational?), enables or prevents a fun work environment, and interprets (or ignores) the corporate rules and structure, into a daily practice of shared work. While managers are hired to get stuff done for their employer, they also make a personal commitment to each of their reports ... manager[s] automatically take on more responsibility for the career of their employee than anyone else in the organization or company."

Teams usually comprise a wide range of personalities, so understanding the personality of people very different from you is key to working together successfully. Author Michael Lopp, in an article titled "Stables and Volatiles," talks about two of these personality types. Although his article focuses on the personality types of software developers, similar qualities can apply to the design professions. In the article, Lopp notes:

"[A] healthy company that wants to continue to grow and invent needs to equally invest in both their Stables and their Volatiles. ... Stables ... remind you about reality and ... process whereby large groups of people can be coordinated to actually get work done. Your Stables bring predictability, repeatability, and credibility to your execution, and you need to build a world where they can thrive.

Volatiles ... remind you that nothing lasts ... and that the world is full of Volatiles who consider it their mission in life to replace the inefficient, boring, and uninspired ... you need to create a corner of the building where they can disrupt."

How to build a high-performing team

"Calling a group of assembled people a team does not make them one. Telling employees they need to collaborate does not translate into collaboration. Teams do not just happen naturally." – David Thiel

David Thiel's article in *Design Intelligence*, "A Process to Build High-Performance Teams," identifies six key traits of these teams:

- common purpose
- clear roles
- accepted leadership
- effective processes
- solid relationships
- excellent communication

It is worth exploring each of these traits in more detail to see where each can be applied as a focus of firm-wide and project-specific efforts.

Common purpose. As a project manager and leader, are you sharing a vision with your team about all the ways in which your project is essential? According to Thiel, this common purpose must have clarity, relevance, significance, and urgency and must be achievable.

Clear roles. Nowhere is the adage “to thine own self be true” more important than in our professional lives. Encourage team members to be self-aware of their strengths and weaknesses (and model this behavior yourself) as a first step toward thinking proactively about how they would like to contribute to a project and improve their skills.

Accepted leadership. To borrow an analogy apropos of an orchestra, there can only be one conductor (otherwise musical or architectural chaos would ensue), but each individual player is also vitally important. And, most important, both the leader and the players must acknowledge and embrace this.

Effective processes. Process, much like project management itself, is sometimes frowned upon as inhibiting the creativity of design professionals. But in reality, process provides a scaffolding for teams, keeping simple tasks simple and allowing them to devote their best thinking and energy where it is most needed.

Solid relationships. Respect and trust are two cornerstones for building good working relationships among a team. Thiel notes that friendship is not an aspect of these relationships; in fact, a team with a diverse group of individuals can produce exceptional design work precisely because of their differing views and experience.

Excellent communication. The use of digital tools has led to a renewed emphasis on effective communication. According to Thiel, communication must be fast, clear, timely, and accurate. Depending on the mix of generations on a team, methods of communication may include traditional meetings, stand-up quick discussions, phone calls, email, text messages, and online group chat rooms. Communication methods should be intentional and comfortable for all team members.

True accountability helps us improve

Accountability is often mentioned in discussions of coaching and leadership. Accountability should not be perceived as a negative but rather as a means for a team to talk honestly about what needs to be done, how it needs to be done, and the importance of doing it well so that everyone succeeds. Robert Gaarder's article, "A Lack of Accountability Erodes Leadership Credibility," provides a good introduction to issues a team leader should consider.

As Gaarder notes, “you are not doing any favors to the person you are not holding accountable. ... If people do a mediocre job or exhibit bad behavior that affects their ability to work with others, they may be developing habits that will be detrimental to their career.” This also relates well to the ideal of clear roles and self-awareness among team members.

Conclusion

By focusing on the professional development and growth of their team members, project managers will achieve better results on their projects, and everyone will be able to improve as professionals.

About the contributor

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This article corresponds to:

Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice, 15th edition Unit 1 - The Profession
Chapter 05 – Organizational Development
Section 05 – Leader Effectiveness