Being a team leader

- What is a team leader?
- What does a team leader do?
- How does a team leader earn the trust and respect of the team?

In the two BS2 sessions What is leadership? and Leadership styles we explored the nature of leadership and looked at ways in which people can act as leaders. In particular, we saw that leadership involves using a range of skills and that it requires certain personal characteristics. We also saw that you can lead a team in different ways. In particular, you can decide how much to involve them in decision-making and how tasks or person focussed you need to be. Finally, we saw that you remain accountable for the team’s performance, no matter how much you allow them to make decisions.

In this session we will bring these different ideas together by looking at the role of the team leader and what it means for you. In particular, we will see how important it is for you to gain the respect and trust of your team if you are to lead them effectively. We will see what you have to do to earn this respect and trust.
What do team leaders do?

Team leaders lead teams! Simple. Except that it isn’t, because teams can be of different types, different sizes and have different roles and tasks to perform. A team of four is different from a team of 20. A team of full time employees is different from a team of part time employees, and they are both very different from a team of volunteers. A team whose members all work in the same area is different from one that is dispersed, visiting customers on site.

Because of this, there’s no one definition of what a team leader’s role is. However, there are some characteristics that are common across different team leader roles. These are:

- **Control:** Team leaders are only responsible for the work of the one team. Managers may be responsible for several teams or for one large team that is divided into ‘sub-teams’ or groups.

- **Responsibility:** Team leaders are responsible for the work of the team on a day-to-day basis. They won’t be responsible for long term planning, although they may get consulted, nor do they decide how big the team is or what its responsibilities are, as a team.

- **Communication:** Team leaders are the main channel of communication between the team and the organisation. They pass on information and provide feedback.

This case study illustrates what team leaders do and don’t do.

**Case Study**

Paula has been called into her manager's office. He tells her that the company needs to reduce its workforce. They have just lost a major customer and need to cut their costs. Paula thinks she is going to be made redundant. She was only made up to team leader three months ago and has just started a training course.

However, her manager tells her that she's OK. She isn't affected. However, two members of her team will have to go. There is an opportunity for voluntary redundancy. He hopes that they won't have to make anyone leave. Paula says: “Do I have to decide who can have redundancy?”

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Paula, like most team leaders, doesn’t ‘hire or fire’ people. She may be consulted when people are being hired or fired, but doesn’t make the decisions. She doesn’t get to know about detailed plans for the future, because she is too busy making sure that today’s work gets done. She can’t commit the organisation to spend money, other than small amounts from petty cash. Anything bigger, and she needs her manager’s approval. So what does a team leader do?

Team leaders are best thought of as being part of a team. First and foremost they work alongside other team members, doing the same sort of tasks as them. Being the leader of the team adds to this role.

Team leaders focus on the day-to-day performance of the team and its members. This means allocating tasks between team members, ensuring individuals are able to do their job, and that output conforms to requirements. They should be aware of the need to satisfy customer or user requirements. They can’t change standard practices but can identify how they might be improved and recommend changes. Team leaders make sure that things get done that should be done. Team leaders make organisations work!

Creating and maintaining a team

Team leaders need teams. That seems obvious, but they need real teams not just groups of people who work together. There’s more about what makes a team in the session From work groups to teams, but the main role of a team leader is to help your team be a team. Being a team means that people:

- share common goals
- work co-operatively (they help and support each other)
- show respect for each other
- have the knowledge and skills to do their tasks well
- see themselves as being a team.

Let’s look at each of these, in turn.
Sharing **common goals** means that the team has goals and the members of the team see these as their primary goals. That means that they are setting out to achieve the team goals. If they have individual goals, these are designed to enable the team to achieve its goals. That means that a key part of your role is to agree team goals, with your team and with your manager. It also means making sure that individuals' goals are designed to ensure that the team's goals are met.

**Working co-operatively** means that team members don't work in isolation from each other. They see their role as being to ensure that all the team's tasks are completed successfully, not just their own. They will help each other out with advice, they will take on each others’ tasks to help balance the workload. Those with particular knowledge and skills will help others to develop them. As team leader you need to encourage and support co-operation, and be willing to show what it means through your own behaviour.

This can only happen if people have **respect for each other**. Respect means that they treat each other as being an equal member of the team, making an equal contribution. If some team members are highly skilled, and others have lower skill levels, this should not create a hierarchy. Hierarchy means some people are more important than others. You shouldn’t make anybody feel more or less important in the team because of their skills, their age or their experience. Treat everyone with respect and judge them by their commitment to work as well as they can.

A hierarchy is less likely if people have the opportunity to **develop their knowledge and skills**. The best teams have people who are multi-skilled. Multi-skilled means that they can complete several different tasks. This makes the team more flexible and more able to work co-operatively.

People cannot work as a team if they don’t **see themselves as being part of a team**. You should encourage them to feel that the team is important. In some organisations this may involve having names or symbols to show you are all in the same team. In others it may be much lower key. However, you should encourage team members to see the team as the focus of their work.

The Case Study over the page shows what effective teams should be like.
It’s hard to make your team do what you want them to do. Most team leaders have very limited positional power. (Remember, positional power is the power that comes from the job role.) Being team leader may make you responsible for your team’s performance, but doesn’t usually give you much power to make anything happen.

To help create and maintain an effective team you need to use your personal power. That is the power you gain through who you are and how you behave. Personal power depend on the respect and trust that your team has for you, as a person. You can’t make people respect and trust you, you have to earn their respect and trust.
How do you do that? In the session *What is leadership?*, we listed 12 characteristics that all leaders need. They are:

1. Communication and social skills
2. Personal drive, sense of purpose and motivation
3. Dependability, conscientiousness and persistence
4. Ability to motivate others
5. Innovation and vision
6. Honesty and integrity
7. Self-confidence, willingness to accept challenges and take risks, emotional maturity
8. Ability to inspire trust
9. Intelligence
10. Knowledge about the organisation you work for
11. Genuine interest in others and valuing them
12. A team orientation (you like working with a team of people)

You need all these characteristics to create trust and respect.

- Trust comes from people knowing that you do what you say you will do, and that if you say you can do something you can do it.

- Respect comes from people observing your behaviour and seeing that you don’t compromise on your personal values, the things that you believe in. If you believe in something, you are not afraid to say what you believe in, and you act in ways that show what you believe in.

Trust and respect are like a house built out of cards. They are very difficult to build, take a lot of time, and one small error and the whole lot comes crashing down. Unlike a house of cards, it’s even harder to rebuild trust and respect. You earn trust and respect by what you do and you have to keep doing it to retain the trust and respect. Because of it, people will follow where you lead and will value what you value. If you value the team and strive to work as well as possible, they will model their behaviour on you.
There are seven qualities that you should try to develop as a team leader. These will help you to motivate your team members and to adopt an effective leadership style.

They are:
1. **Be positive** – focus on solving problems not blaming other people for them and involve the team in developing a plan of action.
2. **Be consistent** – enable people to predict their team leader’s behaviour and help them to respond in a positive way.
3. **Be responsive** – make accurate assessments of the needs and expectations of the team.
4. **Be self-aware** – recognise your strengths and weaknesses and those of the team and ‘play to their strengths’ and develop their weaknesses.
5. **Be developmental** – identify your own and others training needs and support the team in meeting these.
6. **Be persuasive** – make an effective case to support the work of the team.
7. **Be innovative** – be clear about future needs and able to encourage team members to meet these needs.

**Exercise**

Complete the following table to assess where you currently are in your role as a team leader. Grade yourself on a scale from 1 (*I’m very good at this*) to 5 (*I’m very bad at this*). Give examples of how you perform.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership quality</th>
<th>Example from your practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsive</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### Exercise *continued*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership quality</th>
<th>Example from your practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-aware</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuasive</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovative</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You might want to discuss your self-assessment with your line manager or your tutor, mentor or coach.
Complete the following exercises. Refer back to the session if necessary.

A. List the three characteristics that most team leaders share.
   1. __________________
   2. __________________
   3. __________________

B. Team leaders need to create and maintain their teams. Complete the following statements about what teams need.
   1. Share common ________.
   2. Work ________________ (they help and support each other).
   3. Show __________ for each other.
   4. Have the __________ and ________ to do their tasks well.
   5. See themselves as being a ________.

C. Complete the following statements by circling the letter of the option that best fits.
   1. Most team leaders have very limited:
      a. positional power.
      b. personal power.
      c. team members.
   2. Trust can only be:
      a. demanded by team leaders in post.
      b. earned by doing what you say you will do.
      c. earned by surprising people by what you do.
   3. Respect can only be:
      a. demanded by team leaders in post.
      b. earned through years in post.
      c. earned by living up to your values.
Answer the questions following the case.

Sam leads the reception team in a hotel. He has had a bad day. Equipment broke down, deliveries failed to arrive and he was developing a cold. Now, just as it was getting close to leaving, Annie has come to him with a problem.

Annie: “Sam, you know you said we shouldn’t leave customer valuables in the cupboard under reception? Well, I did, because you were fixing the photocopier and said you mustn’t be disturbed, so I didn’t want to go and get you to open the safe. We were busy and he said he’d be back in half an hour. Well, he’s just ‘phoned from the airport saying he’s lost a watch he’d bought for his wife. He thought he’d left it at the hotel but couldn’t remember. I think he’d had a boozy lunch. Anyway, I looked and it had gone. I’m not sure, but I think it might have been with those boxes that were thrown out. I’ve told him we don’t have it. Is that OK?”

If you were Sam, what would you do?
How well do you use the skills in this session?

- Is your role as team leader clear? Do you know what is expected of you by your manager and your team?

- Do you think that your team trust and respect you? What do they do that makes you think that?

1. Read the list of skills. Tick the boxes to show your strengths and weaknesses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>strengths &lt;-&gt; weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I'm good at this</td>
<td>I'm quite good at this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I'm not so good at this</td>
<td>I'm quite poor at this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recognize my responsibilities as a team leader</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>creating and maintaining my team</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>earning the trust of my team</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>earning the respect of my team</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

2. Do you want to improve any of these skills?

3. How do you plan to improve the skills you listed in question 2? (You might want to discuss this with your line manager or your tutor/mentor/coach.)