

[5] LOOKING AT THE TEAM LEADER

This chapter discusses the question of what is expected from a team leader. The team leader holds a central position within the team. The title assigned to a team leader in teams can vary; sometimes the leader is called the chair, the coordinator, the director or the manager. Various tasks, responsibilities and authority come with the position of team leader, and these distinguish the leader from the other members of the team. She or he acts as manager of the team's work, but also keeps track of what is happening outside the team. The leader also monitors the process within the team and deals with interrelationships and any tension on the periphery of the group.

GLOBAL TEAM LEADER REQUIREMENTS

Content

The team leader must be familiar with the area in which the team are working, and needs to have a 'helicopter view' in terms of content. He or she must be able to place the team's assignment in the broader perspective of policy developments in this area, and this brings us back to the first quality requirement in the composition of a team: that the team members must demonstrate significant professional competency. The increased complexity of issues these days means that the team leader often knows less about some parts of the team members' specific fields than they do. As a result, much is required of the leader's behavioural competencies – in particular coaching skills and dealing with complexity – and personality.

Organisational

The team leader needs to ensure that the assignment is completed within a certain period of time. He or she must direct the flow of information not only from outside but also inside the team, and must also direct and encourage consultation both inside and outside the team. It is vital that ensuring sound opinion forming and decision making are combined with a continual helicopter view of inside and outside developments.

This must be achieved with a certain level of objectivity that enables the leader to stimulate strengths while giving him or her the confidence and willingness to recognise weaknesses.

The team leader can delegate a number of matters, but this does not relieve the him or her of the obligation to maintain an overview of the whole. Leaders also have to understand the opportunities and limitations of change processes in a team's work area. Encouraging change requires a proper understanding of what changes do to people and the tensions that they can cause.

Social and relationship skills

Issues relating to content or organization always have relationship aspects: contact between the people inside the team, and with others on the outside. All of these contacts require a variety of social skills. This places a high demand on good communication and leading conversations, on identifying opportunities for cooperation and on solving problems and conflicts. If a leader knows less about the content of the work than the team members, he or she must have good coaching skills. In turn, this requires a significant amount of self-confidence. The team leader's role as coach will be discussed in more detail later.

MANAGEMENT ROLES AND TASKS

The rest of this chapter discusses in more detail the sketch of a team leader given above, and use will be made of experience data in literature. A distinction is made between ten roles, divided into three groups⁴⁶. These are shown in reflection 20.

Reflection 20: Team leader management roles

1. Formal roles

The team leader holds a central position in the team's organisation. This formal position gives the leader a special status. Three roles are the consequences of this formal position:

- *The formal representative*

Commissions are sometimes named after the chair, for example. This individual is considered to be the commission's figurehead, representing the commission to the outside world. She or he has to account for the team's results and for its continued existence.

- *The formal leader*

A team needs leadership and motivation. In the leadership role the team leader determines the tone and the overall atmosphere within the team. The team leader must be aware of large and small inadequacies and problems, and should not hesitate to intervene and take any measures necessary. The execution of this role will be discussed in more detail later.

- *External liaison*

The key issue in this role is establishing and maintaining contacts to the benefit of the team with individuals and organisations outside the team.

2. Information roles

The team leader is the nerve centre of the team's organisation. He absorbs a variety of information, processes it and passes it on. This involves more than just formal and official information: coincidental, spontaneous information is equally important if not more important. This results in three information roles:

- *Radar*

Like radar, the team leader constantly searches for information; it enables the leader to feel and understand how the team is doing. This means that the leader will discover minor changes, identify problems, see opportunities and/or risks, and will also keep an eye on the general environment.

A team leader continually stays up to date without immediately taking action.

- *Information distributor*

The radar role enables the team leader to keep others up to date. The team leader distributes not only factual information but also evaluative information: opinions.

- *Spokesperson*

The distribution of information primarily focuses inside the team; being a spokesperson focuses more on the outside world. As the formal representative of the team, the team leader is approached by others and actively supplies information to them, including at his or her own initiative.

3. Decision-making roles

Two groups of roles have already been discussed: the formal roles as representative, leader and liaison, and the information roles as radar, distributor of information and spokesperson. The following four roles are primarily related to decision making.

- *Enterpriser*

A team leader actively anticipates changes in the team and in its surroundings. This is evident in a tendency to anticipate future developments. The leader utilises the opportunities discovered in the radar role, initiating new tasks, addressing and organising these.

- *Problem solver*

The team leader takes action when interruptions disrupt and surprise the team and strives to minimise any disadvantages. The leader makes sure that the team can get back to work as usual, and do so as soon as possible. Interruptions in the normal course of events may include:

- conflicts between members, conflicts between areas of expertise or conflicts regarding resources
- attuning errors; for example, any which arise between departments represented in the team.

- *Resource assigner*

Resources are understood to include manpower, funds, time, equipment, expertise and reputation. This role enables the team leader to determine the focus of the team's efforts. A distinction is often made between three dimensions of this role: time, work scheduling and authorising action. Time means priority here; matters assigned priority receive relatively more attention and are more readily assigned resources.

- *Negotiator*

Teams in organisations are a part of a larger organisational whole. Teams are often made up of representatives from various departments or organisations. Based on a discipline or a shared activity, a pattern of standards and values is developed within a department that primarily emphasises departmental interests. Because each discipline has its own way of thinking and its own approach, communication between people with different specialised and functional backgrounds can sometimes cause problems. That's not because team members are unwilling to communicate, but because they do not always speak the same 'language'. The team leader must deal with these problems. If the team is to be successful, the leader must choose the right path between these potential minefields of tension. This requires a high degree of flexibility and the capacity to accurately assess situations based on the interests of a larger whole.

THE TEAM LEADER AS CHAIR

We took a specific look at the team leader as manager of the team's organisation. The team leader also chairs meetings. Demands may be placed on the chair. What are the specific tasks of the chair-person of a meeting?

Leading or chairing a meeting can be divided into five specific tasks:

1. *Commencing the meeting process*

The chair must:

- determine the theme and objective of the meeting
- emphasise the essential agenda points
- clearly formulate the topic.

2. *Developing the meeting process*

The chair must formulate new questions that encourage the members of the team to make useful contributions to the discussion.

3. *Monitoring the meeting process*

The chair must:

- ensure that the business objective is achieved
- ensure that people's reactions do not obstruct the aim – achieving the business objective.

4. *Directing the meeting process*

- businesslike: providing summaries, formulating conclusions and posing new questions
- guiding people's reactions at the appropriate time by asking questions and making comments.

5. *Concluding the meeting process*

The chair must:

- formulate summaries and decisions
- verify that the meeting's participants agree with the decisions or conclusions as formulated.

Chairmanship was discussed here briefly; naturally there is much more that can be said about it. Please refer to the literature on meetings.

THE TEAM LEADER AS LEADER

Usually, the team leader is also the team members' hierarchical leader. The leader is often the constant factor in a team. The leader's approach and interventions determine the atmosphere and standards in the group as well as the group's development. It is not without reason that leadership is the most discussed group role that exists.⁴⁸ Much research has been done on the relationship between leadership styles and group productivity. Here the leadership theory developed by Hersey and Blanchard is applied as the premise for the description of the interaction between the leader and the group. According to their concept of situational leadership,⁴⁹ there are two aspects to effective team leadership: directing and supportive behaviour.

- *Directing behaviour*

Directing behaviour is aimed at both achieving objectives and the team's activities. This means that the team leader determines the main line, defines and clarifies goals, assigns tasks, determines limits, directs the team towards decisions, and requests and provides information.

- *Supportive behaviour*

Supportive behaviour focuses on progress and on the process of cooperation. The team leader must create a learning and working climate, arrive at group standards, provide feedback, establish and build relationships, ensure trust and decision-making capacity, mediate in conflicts, etc.

LEADERSHIP STYLES PER DEVELOPMENT STAGE

In an ideal situation, the extent to which a team leader directs and supports – whether more and less – is dependent on the team's current development stage (see Chapter 4). The leadership styles are discussed by stage below.

1. The orientation stage

The leader focuses on providing a safe structure and clear leadership. This means clearly explaining the assignment, determining realistic and feasible targets, and making plans to obtain the necessary skills. There is some need for supportive behaviour, especially with reference to acceptance of the leader and the other team members. This need is much more modest, however, than the need for task-oriented behaviour.

2. The measuring up and competition stage

In this stage the leader focuses on directive coaching, with a balance between high levels of both directive and supportive behaviour. The main focus is on maintaining differences between the team members and dealing with any resistance to his or her leadership and control. Task-oriented behaviour may mean redefining the objective, coaching skills and task know-how, and providing clarity in structure. Supportive behaviour can mean actively listening, recognising dissatisfaction and difficulties, and devoting explicit attention to the group process and interpersonal relationships – and developing interpersonal skills. Denial and aggressive or defensive behaviour on the part of the leader can cause unnecessary negative feelings to escalate or to be kept secret, but it will not resolve them.

3. The cohesion stage

At this stage the leader will focus rather more on support: the specific coaching style. The need to direct the group in its assignment is reduced; what is needed now is more consultation with the group and recognition of the efforts being contributed to it by the group members. Many leaders find it difficult to relinquish their decision-making authority and to trust in the group's partner role. At this point it is important for the leader to resist the urge to avoid any conflicts and dissension out of fear of losing cohesion; instead these need to be discussed.

4. The performance stage

Skills continue to grow in this stage. The task level is high and the atmosphere is healthy. In general this will generate confidence, good levels of cooperation and autonomous functioning. As a result, the leader loses his or her special status, and so the leader's emphasis primarily shifts to supervising the objective and performance, while also supporting autonomy. At this stage the leader has more time to devote energy to other things.

5. The termination stage

Completing and evaluating the assignment are characteristic of this stage. The atmosphere can vary significantly. It is useful for the team if the leader accepts his or her personal feelings of loss and recognises these feelings in the others; this contributes to concluding the team's efforts in a healthy atmosphere. If performance and atmosphere deteriorate significantly, the leader may need to reinforce both directing and supportive behaviour and return to a more coaching or participating leadership style.

THE TEAM LEADER AS MEDIATOR

As already described in Chapter 4, the team leader is responsible for managing conflicts in and involving the team. This often incorporates the role of mediator, as well. This mediation can be informal – for example, if the leader encounters two competing team members at the coffee machine – or more formal, if the leader is asked to act in a clearly-defined role or procedure. In performing this role, the following conditions are important⁵⁰:

- a positive approach to conflicts
- giving people and their feelings the necessary space without being judgmental
- a clear, step by step, win-win process
- the skill of managing conflicts.

And on this last condition, here are a number of tips.

- Listen patiently and attentively to both parties.
- Be willing to assume that people are telling the truth: their truth.
- Do not draw conclusions immediately. The parties involved need to believe that you accept their truth and their perspective on the issue.
- Remain calm. Never lose your temper or your sight of the overall objective.
- Be sure to keep confidential information confidential. Never give details, not even when pressured to do so.
- Take a structured and organised approach. Keep people informed of the steps in the process and make sure that meetings are well organised.

HIERARCHY AND HEROIC LEADERSHIP

It is all too often assumed that team work and hierarchy are opposites. So the ideal – ‘in this team, we're all equals’ – soon prevails over the practical assignment of tasks and responsibilities, including ultimate responsibility, which is usually best assigned to a single individual. However, the important issue is the perspective of ultimate responsibility and leadership that is applied. ‘Heroic’ leadership, in which the leader determines a brilliant vision and makes all the difficult decisions, does not work well in a team. In teams, leadership is a subservient and binding role, directed – as far as possible – towards giving the qualities of the individual group members and the strength of the group as a whole the room to shine. Sadly, many people still cherish the concept of heroic leadership⁵¹, despite (and along with) all the lip service that is paid to teamwork. We believe that modest leadership is more beneficial to teams, and to organizations. In his latest book, Collins calls this ‘level 5 leadership’. This involves not only subservience but also having a determined will. Collins' work indicates that companies that demonstrate excellent performance often have leaders of this type.⁵²