Jeff Oltmann on Mastering Projects
Get Your Team on the Bus

Ride the Bus

Even great leaders need help. On a project, leadership is more important than technical competence [1] or any other skill, but it's not enough. Project leaders also need an effective team.

Jim Collins underscores the importance of getting the right people on the team in his book *Good to Great*. [2] Collins and his research team looked at the question, "Can a good company become a great company, and if so, how?" After five years of gathering and analyzing data, they found eight common themes in companies that transformed themselves from merely good results to amazingly great results.

One of these themes is that great leaders first find the right people to put on their team, and only after that attend to other important issues, such as setting a strategy. In Collins's colorful terms, great leaders "first got the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats – and then they figured out where to drive it." [3]

> "The old adage "People are your most important asset" is wrong. People are not your most important asset. The *right* people are. Whether someone is the "right person" has more to do with character traits and innate capabilities than with specific knowledge, background, or skills."
>
> Jim Collins, "Good to Great," p 64, HarperCollins, 2001

Find the Right People

What Collins says about the executive leadership of a company also applies to project managers and teams. Whether your project is good or great depends significantly on the team you assemble.

> **Great leaders put people *first***
>
> 1. Get the right people on the bus
> 2. Put them in the right seats
> 3. *Then* point the bus in the right direction

Collins offers three practical ways to implement his "First who, then what" finding: [4]

1. When in doubt, keep looking.

2. When you know you need to make a people change, act. (Corollary: First be sure you don't simply have someone in the wrong seat.)

3. Put your best people on your biggest opportunities, not your biggest problems.

If your choice of team members is limited, greatness may depend on how well you define their responsibilities to match their strengths, and how well you fill the gaps with training and mentoring.

Support the Team

Once you have the right people in the right seats on the bus, how do you build an environment where they can be highly effective? Eric Verzuh uses the analogy of a bridge supported by an arch. [5] The project team is the platform that crosses the ravine, allowing the project to get from point A to point B.

An arch supports the platform, holding it steady. This arch is composed of nine girders. They work together to make an effective support structure.
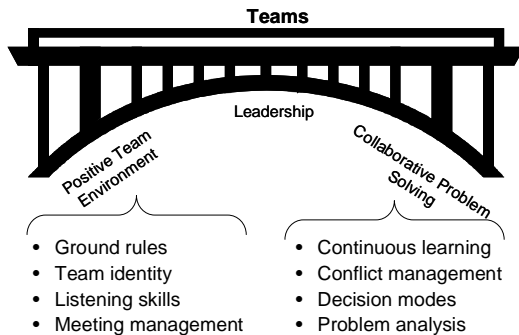
On the left side are four support girders that create a positive team environment:

- **Ground rules** describe the ways in which the team agrees to work together

- **A team identity** emerges from commitment to shared goals

- **Listening skills** enable the team to exchange ideas

- **Effective meetings** enable the team to accomplish work

The support girders on the right enable the team to identify and solve problems together:

- **Continuous improvement,** where the team learns from both successes and failures

- **Conflict management skills** leverage healthy conflict to achieve creative solutions, make good decisions, and still maintain healthy relationships

- **Appropriate decision protocols** promote timely and effective decisions

- **Problem solving processes** leverage the diverse styles of team members

The capstone is the team leader, who ties it all together.

Manage Team Dynamics

Teams are a bit like people – they develop dynamics and a personality uniquely their own. In 1965, Dr. Bruce Tuckman, an educational psychologist, articulated four stages of group development. [6] I've found his model to be very useful as I lead project and program teams.
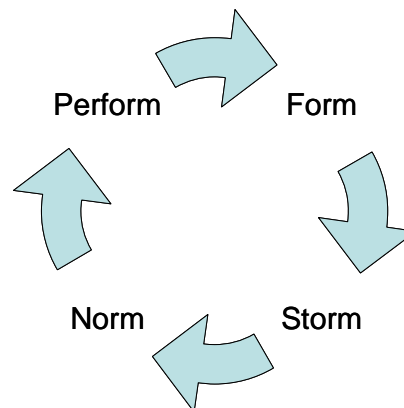
1 Forming: I think of this as the "honeymoon phase." The team members are getting to know each other and the project. Individuals gather information and impressions about each other and the scope of the project. This phase focuses on the organizational issues of getting started, so not much "real work" gets done. The team is highly dependent on the leader in this stage.

2 Storming: As important issues start to be addressed, patience wears thin and disagreements start to arise. At this point, the honeymoon is over. Disagreements may be about roles, responsibilities, and power, or about the project work itself. Team members begin desiring a framework for structuring the team and its work.

3 **Norming:** The group has finally clarified and agreed on the scope of the project and their roles. They can listen and understand each other better. They are focused more on the work of the project rather than the dynamics of the team's operation. This is a productive stage.

4 Performing: The team becomes more interdependent. They work together closely while still allowing each other independence. The team has an identity and loyalty.

I've learned two big things from applying Tuckman's model to project and program teams:

- Trying to skip or shortcut a stage forces issues underground and will cause problems either immediately or later. However, a good leader will facilitate the team's progress through the stages so they don't get bogged down.

- Any substantial change to the team will cause it to regress to the forming stage, so be careful how often you change the membership or roles on your team!

Endpoint

Great leaders realize that they depend completely on an effective team. Apply this on your projects in four ways:

1. Attend to people first. When leading your team, "first who, then what."

2. Invest in creating a positive team environment.

3. Build collaborative problem solving skills.

4. Guide your team through its storming, forming, norming, and performing stages.

For Further Reading

[1] Jeff Oltmann, "This Project Needs a Leader – Now!", November 2008, www.spspro.com/SPS_cases_papers.htm

[2] Jim Collins, *Good to Great*, HarperCollins, 2001

[3] Ibid, p. 13

[4] Ibid, p. 63

[5] Eric Verzuh, *Fast Forward MBA in Project Management, 3rd edition*, fig 10.1, p 257, John Wiley & Sons, 2008

[6] Bruce Tuckman, *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 63, no. 6, pp. 384-399, American Psychological Bulletin, 1965

About the Author

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