So they made you a lead; now what?

Oliver Franzke

Lead Programmer – Double Fine Productions

p1xelcoder

So they made you a lead?!

- Leadership requires a different skillset
- Most new leads struggle to adjust
- You can learn necessary skills

“So they made me a lead?!”

“How to be like that guy?”

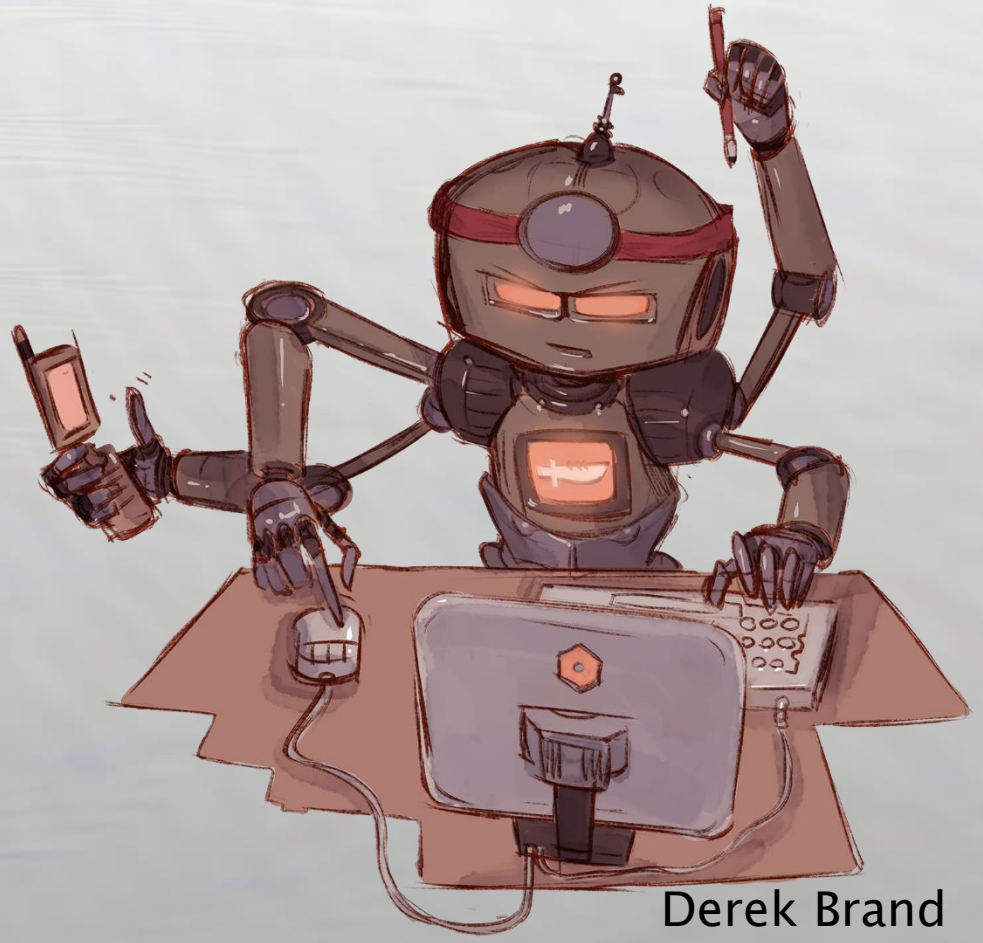
Great boss

- Team morale was high
- My contributions were valued
- I knew where we were heading
- Good communicator

Supervisor I didn’t like

- Didn’t communicate clearly
- Goals not obvious
- My work didn’t seem important
- No encouragement
- Team complained a lot

“Now what?”



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Why is leadership important?

- Deep hierarchies are uncommon
- Interdisciplinary cooperation is needed
- Team coordination is essential for success
- A good leader can make individual more effective

Core responsibilities

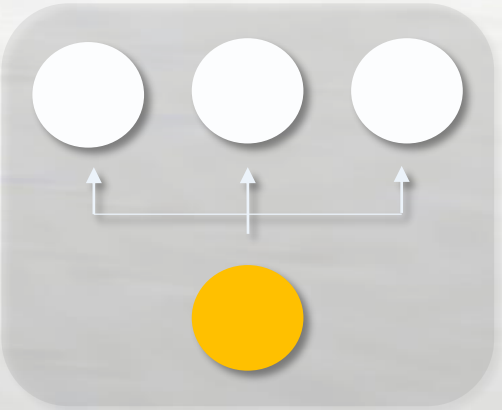
Building trust

- You are not a peer anymore
- Communicate professionally (don’t gossip, no sarcasm)
- Treat people with respect and show that you care
- Be approachable and trustworthy

Setting a direction

- Have a near and long-term plan
- Concise vision statement
- Communicate goals

Supporting the team



- You’re responsible for team’s success
- Make sure people have what they need
- Provide guidance

But what about my actual job?

- Leadership is your actual job
- More conversations, mails, meetings, …
- You'll spend ≤50% of your time with coding, art, design…
- Being a lead always comes first

There is no secret to good leadership.

Mike Acton:

"If you absolutely must have a formula for doing your [leadership] work, here's mine:
Figure out what doesn't work and do less of that;
Figure out what works well and do more of that."

Getting started as a lead

Find a mentor

- Practical advice is invaluable
- Discuss progress and specific problems
- Ideally someone in your organization

Reach out to fellow game developers

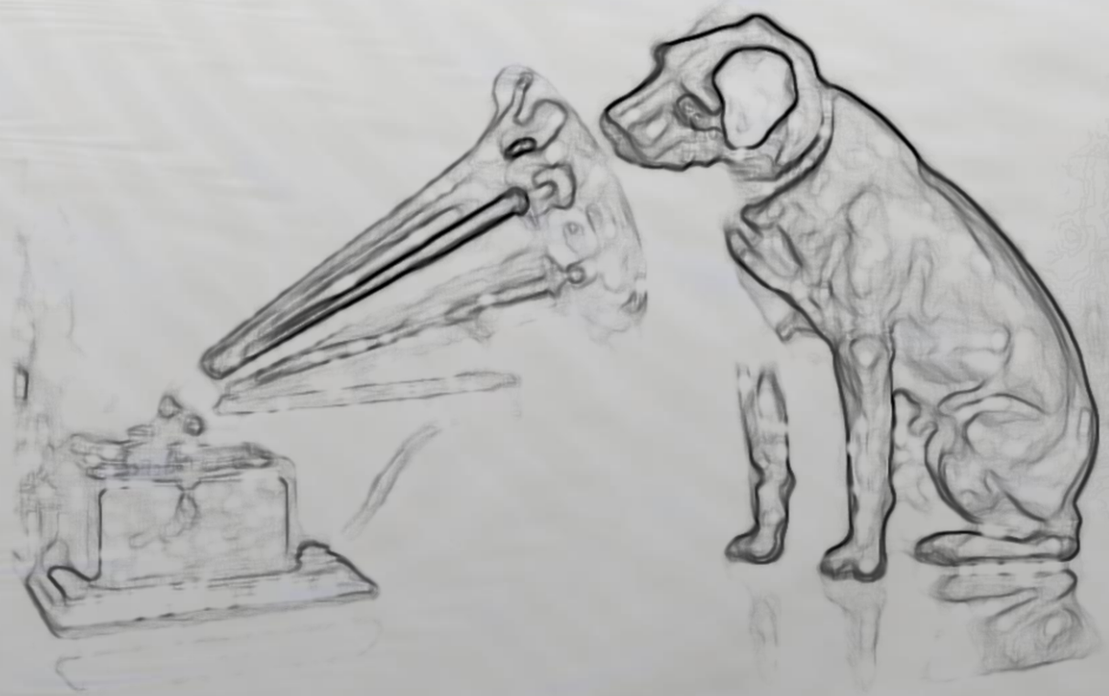
Effective communication

- Key leadership skill
- Requires more time than you think
- It’s okay not to know everything, gather information and follow up

Effective communication

- Be proactive – Don’t wait for someone else
- Be transparent – Things go wrong, find a solution
- Be clear – Team can’t read your mind

Learn to listen



Ask open ended questions

- Encourage people to elaborate
- “What” and “why” are important
- Helps you to get more information

Ask open ended questions

- Example
  - Open: “What do you think about this feature and how long will it take?”
  - Closed: “We are going to add this feature. Can you get it done this sprint?”

Active listening

- Re-state or paraphrase what you heard
- Allows communication partner to hear what you understood
- Resolve miscommunication right away
- Essential for conflict resolution

One-on-one meetings

- Builds mutual trust
- Meet regularly (e.g. monthly)
- Don’t skip even if there is not much to talk about
- Pick location so that sensitive topics can be discussed

One-on-one topics

- Not a status update!
- Talk about career goals, problems, …
- Example questions:
  - “Do you enjoy what you are working on?”
  - “What do you think about the project?”
  - “Where do you see yourself in 5 years?”

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Really listen

- No distractions! Turn off phone…
- Make people feel important and valued
- Take notes. Agree on action items together

Set clear expectations

- Specify explicit and clear guidelines
- Don’t let people guess
- Write it down and send it to team
- It’ll reduce your frustration

Learn to delegate

- Let people ‘grab’ tasks, assign the rest
- Help your team to think through the required work
- Don’t overcommit yourself

Get the team involved

- People on your team are domain experts
- Delegate questions, scoping, …
- Show that you trust your team

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Provide challenges not solutions

- If possible avoid repetitive tasks
- People like to learn new skills and techniques
- Take interests and career goals into consideration

Know what your team is doing

- Be aware of team's progress not just your own
- Different approaches possible
  - Read Perforce commit messages
  - Meet with the producer
  - Talk to team regularly, …
- Also helps to identify problems early

Provide feedback

Criticism

- It's not fun, but address problems right away
- Discuss in private and approach meeting with empathy!
- Treat people with respect, don't be condescending

Find a solution

- Work on plan for improvement together
- Share summary and action items with team member
- Follow up on progress and be supportive

Praise

- Boosts team morale
- Write down accomplishments so you remember
- Mention achievements in public

Leadership is tough but not impossible!

You can become a great team lead!

Brian Sharp

"Comprehension != Mastery"

"Practice is the opposite of hoping"

This is just the beginning.

Thank you!

Are there questions?

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Resources

Presentations

- Concrete Practices to be a better Leader
  - Brian Sharp – GDC 2010 – Free GDC Vault video
- Great Management of Technical Leads
  - Mike Acton – GDC 2015
- Leading High Performance Teams
  - Madelaine Beermann – GDC 2015
- You're Responsible
  - Mike Acton – SIEGE 2013 – Free Video

Books

- Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most
  - Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen, Roger Fisher
- Team Leadership in the Games Industry
  - Seth Spaulding
- How to Lead
  - Jo Owen

Web

- Lead Quick Start Guide
  - Mike Acton – Gamasutra, #AltDevBlog
- So they made you a lead; now what?
  - Oliver Franzke – Gamasutra, #AltDevBlog
- A Simple Test of Leadership
  - Keith Fuller – Gamasutra