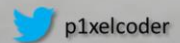


So they made you a **lead**; now what?

Oliver Franzke
Lead Programmer - Double Fine Productions



So they made **you** a lead?!

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

I talked to several leads (or ex-leads) and none of them had ever received any kind of leadership training. Some people were lucky enough to have a mentor, but even that doesn't seem to be the standard. To me the most troubling fact is that none of the leads were ever told what was expected of them in their new role.

It is important to realize that:

- Leadership requires a new skillset and you can learn it
- Nobody expects you to be perfect
- Most people struggle to adjust
- It's okay to ask for help

“So they made me a lead?!”



My first experience as a team lead was my role as the Lead Engine Programmer on “Once Upon a Monster” (Xbox 360 + Kinect). I was excited about this promotion, but I really had no clue what I was doing or what I was supposed to do. I was a good programmer and a responsible team player (which is why I was promoted I guess) and I figured I should simply continue coding until some kind of big revelation would turn me into an awesome team lead. Obviously I never had this magical epiphany and after a while I realized I should probably start investigating leadership in a more methodical way.

“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

In the past I had some great bosses and others that I didn't like too much. I started to analyze the leadership strategy used by the different supervisor. When working for a boss I liked the team morale was high and everyone on the team knew where we are heading. Personally I felt that my contributions were valued and because of that I was enthusiastic about my tasks. The situation was quite different when working for a supervisor I didn't like: people on the team gossiped and complained a lot and nobody really knew what our goals were. To me personally it seemed like my work didn't matter and because of that I often wasn't very motivated to work on my tasks.

Obviously I wanted to become just like one of awesome supervisors.

“Now what?”



My goal for this presentation is to share some of the lessons I learned myself while adjusting to my role as a lead programmer. If you were recently promoted into a leadership position hopefully you'll find some of the content in this post helpful.

I want to emphasize the fact that leadership isn't magic nor do you have to be born for it. Leadership is simply a set of skills that can be learned and in my experience it's worth the time investment!

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

Before talking about specific skill sets and how to develop them it makes sense to ask the question why leadership even matters in the games industry. Most companies have a relatively flat organizational structure and you are surrounded by people with a similar age and interests. This fosters a environment where work is fun and people are buddies, which makes the games industry such a awesome place to be.

It is important to understand that it's an industry though and that a lot of money is invested to make entertainment products. As games become bigger and bigger so do team sizes. At a certain point you'll need a deeper organizational structure in order to manage the complexity. It is your responsibility as a team lead to manage the human complexity and to represent and guide your team so that they can succeed and so that the company can ship the product within the defined constraints.

This might sound a bit abstract and I'll talk more about concrete ways to become a great team lead, but for now it's important to understand that you are responsible for the success of the game. If you see a problem then it's up to you to try to fix it. Don't expect other people to do the right thing.

Of course that means that failure is almost always connected to leadership. I'm not

saying that projects can't fail for other reasons, but a lot of problems can be overcome with good leadership. On the other hand even moderate problems can destroy a project with bad leadership.

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

In order to be an effective lead you'll first have to earn your colleagues trust. If your team feels like they can't come to you with questions, problems or suggestions, then you (and the company) have a big problem. Gaining the trust of your team doesn't happen automatically and requires a lot of effort. You can find some practical advice later in this talk.

Similarly if your supervisor (e.g. project lead) doesn't trust you, then he or she will probably manage around you which is a bad situation for everyone involved. In my experience transparency is crucial when managing up especially when things don't go as planned. Let your supervisor know if there is a problem and take responsibility by working on a solution.

Setting a direction

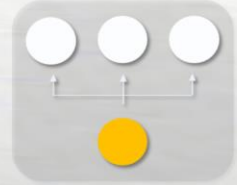


- Have a near and long-term plan
- Concise vision statement
- Communicate goals

Making games is complicated and it would be unrealistic to assume that there won't be problems along the way. Dealing with difficult situations is much easier if everyone on your team is on the same page about what has to get done. Setting a clear direction for your team is therefore a crucial part of your role.

A great mission statement is concise so that it's easy to remember and explain. For an environment art team this could be "We want to create a photorealistic setting for our game" whereas a tools lead might come up with "Every change to the level should be visible right away". Of course it is important that your team's direction is aligned with the vision of the project, because creating a photorealistic environment for a game with a painterly art style doesn't make sense.

Supporting the team



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

In addition to defining a clear direction for your team one of your main responsibilities as a lead is to provide support for your team, so that they can be successful. This might seem very obvious, but the shift from being accountable only for your own work to being responsible for the success of a group of people can be a hard lesson to learn in the beginning.

Support can be provided in many different ways: Discussing the advantages and disadvantages of a proposed solution to a problem is one example. Being a mentor and helping the individual team members with their career progression is another form of support. A third example is to make sure that the team has everything it needs (e.g. dev-kits, access to documentation, tools ...) to achieve the goals.

But what about my **actual** job?

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

At this point you might be asking yourself a question like 'but what about my responsibilities as a programmer, artist or designer'? If your company entrusts you to lead other people then you are obviously quite good at what your production job and if you are like most people you probably love to code, draw or design.

The thing is that your primary responsibilities are different as a lead. Your main job is to support your team, so that they can be successful. Depending on the size of your company this can take up between 20 and 50 percent of your time.

I found this transition pretty hard myself. I love to design and code systems and not knowing what the company expected from me made it even more difficult and it's only human to continue to do what you know in situations of uncertainty.

Maybe this sounds familiar to you as well, because I think most new team leads really struggle with this shift in core responsibilities. You'll have to find way to balance your production and leadership work and if there is one message you take away from this talk today, then it is to take your responsibilities as a leader as serious as your craft (as a programmer, artist or designer).

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

The best way to develop your skills is by learning them directly from a mentor that you respect for his or her leadership abilities. This person doesn't necessarily have to be your supervisor, but ideally it should be someone in the studio where you work. Leadership depends on the organizational structure of a company and it is therefore much harder for someone from the outside to offer practical advice.

Make sure to meet on a regularly basis (at least once a month) in order to discuss your progress. A great mentor will be able to suggest different strategies to experiment with and can help you figure out what does and doesn't work. These meetings also give you the opportunity to learn from his or her career by asking questions like this:

- How would you approach this situation?
- What is leadership?
- Which leader do you look up to and why?
- How did you learn your leadership skills?
- What challenges did you face and how did you overcome them?

Reach out to fellow game developers



But even if you aren't fortunate enough to have access to a mentor you can (and should) still learn from other game developers by observing how they interact with people and how they approach and overcome challenges. The trick is to identify and assimilate effective leadership strategies from colleagues in your company or from developers in other studios.

Effective communication

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

At this point it should be clear that the job of a team (or department) lead requires a lot of talking and mails. In other words communication will be your number one tool. This is what differentiates the role of a lead from a production job. Obviously we all know how to talk and write, so there is nothing to learn here right? Quite the opposite is true in my experience. Being able to communicate in an effective way is a lot of work.

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



When talking about communication it's easy to focus on broadcasting aspect, but I'd argue that listening is even more important than transmitting. As a team lead your responsibility is to bridge the gap between the project leadership and your team and for that it's necessary to know what both parties are up to.

Ask open ended questions

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

One way to become a better listener is to ask more open ended questions. These are questions that can't easily be answered with “yes” or “no”, but instead encourage your communication partner to elaborate on the topic. This will help you to gather a lot of valuable 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

It is important to understand that you (and everyone else) don't necessarily receive the same 'message' that was transmitted by another person since you'll apply your own mental filter, so it's important to make sure that both parties are on the same page. I found the communication technique called 'active listening' pretty helpful. It's pretty simple. Whenever you think you don't fully understand simply paraphrase what the other person said. It gives your communication partner the opportunity to fix potential misunderstandings.

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

Building trust takes a lot of time and effort and an essential part of this process is to have a private chat with each member of your team on a regular basis (at least once a month). These one-on-one meetings can take place in a meeting room or even a nearby coffee shop. The important thing is that both of you feel comfortable having an open and honest conversation, so make sure to pick the location accordingly.

These meetings don't necessarily have to be long. If there is nothing to talk about then you might be done after 10 minutes. At other times it may take an hour (or more) to discuss a difficult situation. Make sure to avoid possible distractions (e.g. mobile phone) during these meetings, so you can give the other person your full attention.

One-on-one meetings raise the morale because the team will realize that they can rely on you to keep them in the loop and to represent their concerns and interests. Personally I find that these conversations help me to do my job better since it's much more likely to hear about a (potential) problem when the team feels comfortable telling me about it.

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?"



Derek Brand

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

Setting clear expectations can be a hard lesson to learn for a new lead. Specifying (reasonable) guidelines for your team has nothing to do with micro management, but in fact it helps both your team and yourself. If you don't let your team know what you expect from them and what details you care about, then you'll be frustrated if work isn't done the way you like it and the people on your team might be frustrated by the 'hidden agenda' they didn't know about.

Learn to delegate

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

Whether you like it or not you'll probably spend more time in meetings and less time contributing directly to the current project. Depending on the size of your company it's safe to assume that leadership and management will take up between 20% and 50% of your time. This means that you won't be able to take on the same amount of production tasks as before and you'll therefore have to learn how to delegate work. I know from personal experience that this can be a tough lesson to learn in the beginning.

Get the team involved

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



Derek Brand

Keep in mind that the people on your team often know more about the details of the work than you, so make sure to involve them in scoping and if there are questions from another department. This will show that you value your teams opinion and trust their judgement.

Provide challenges not solutions

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

In addition to training or career advice it's important to provide an appropriate amount of challenge for everyone on your team, because it'll help your team to develop their skill set. Even though it might seem counter intuitive at first, but it's not always good to assign a task to someone who already solved the same problem in the past. Most people enjoy challenge over repetition and it's your responsibility to get to know your team well enough to understand what kind of challenge they require to thrive. Of course it might take a more junior person longer to solve a problem, but in the long term it'll pay off.

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

- Check in with everyone on a regular basis
- Let's you judge the progress and whether changes are necessary
- Detect problems early
- Essential to manage up, since you have to know the velocity of your team

Just like delegation this is one of the management aspects that most new leads will have to learn. It's important that you spend time to stay up to date with what your team is doing, because you are responsible for the overall progress. It'll reflect badly on you if you don't know what people are doing and if the team will be able to hit the next milestone or not.

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

Another hard lesson to learn for new leads is how to provide feedback. When I started out I was quite anxious about providing negative feedback and so I talked about the good things. Don't get me wrong it's important to give praise, but talking about aspects that require improvement is absolutely crucial. For example the first time I responsible for writing the appraisal for one of my team member I was worried about how the criticism would be received. What if the team member would consider my feedback unfair and start to argue with me? None of that happened of course and in fact the team member agreed with my criticism and we discussed how to work on the problem.

I have since learned that people actually prefer honest feedback and very often are already aware of the problem. It's much better to have a plan for improvement than to let things slide until they become unbearable.

Find a solution

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

Avoid criticizing in public, because at this point the person will be most concerned about not losing respect in front of his/her colleagues. Instead have this conversation in a meeting room and always remember to approach the conversation with empathy. As a lead you are responsible for your team and that also includes helping people to improve their work performance.

Discuss the root of the problem and work on a plan for improvement together. After the meeting follow up on the progress.

Praise

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

Now I already mentioned praise. While this comes natural to some it can be challenging for some to give praise. It's really helps team morale, so make sure to take note of all the great things that your team does. Make sure to praise your team in public and try to be specific.

While praising in public will raise team morale criticizing in public will annihilate morale, so make sure to discuss negative feedback in private.

Lastly it's important to get feedback about your performance from your peers as well as your team. It's important to know about potential problems as soon as possible, so that you can react to it.

Leadership is **tough** but not impossible!

You can **become** a great team **lead**!

Becoming a great team lead is tough and in fact it might be your biggest challenge yet, but I can say from personal experience that it's not impossible. I know it can be daunting to leave your comfort zone and to learn new skills, but I want to stress the point that it's okay not to know everything right away. Nobody expects you to be perfect and there is no shame in being unsure about what to do. It's okay to ask questions. In fact most veteran leads will gladly answer your questions.

Even though you might not contribute as many assets or lines of code as before as a team lead you are a crucial part in making the game a success. It's simply magical to see an entire team pulling in the same direction.

I hope that I was able to help you at least a little bit with your journey. Leadership is hard but not impossible!



Brian Sharp

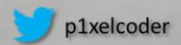
“Comprehension != Mastery”

“Practice is the opposite of hoping”

This is just the beginning.

Thank you!

Are there questions?



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