

Previous Teaming and project management experience

Jonas Li

Over the past seven years, I have gained valuable experience as a team leader in two robotics competition teams, one in high school and one in my undergraduate university, as well as during an internship as a product manager at an autopilot software company. Through these three roles, I have observed both commonalities in management frameworks and notable differences in how these frameworks are applied depending on the organization's structure.

On the positive side, I have gradually refined my approach to engaging team members and developed certain methodologies. For example, after a failure in a high school competition, I learned to view the product (in this case, the robot) from a holistic perspective rather than focusing solely on the component I was working on. This shift in mindset was pivotal for my future experiences, especially during my internship at Momenta, where I identified a system improvement by considering the product as a whole and focusing on customer requirements.

Additionally, I learned from my high school team coach that fostering an inclusive team culture is key to building a high-functioning team. I applied this lesson to my university team by emphasizing that we should accept any competition result as long as we had given our best effort. This united the team toward a common goal, and we achieved the best performance in the team's history. As a leader, I found that balancing compassion and accountability is crucial for both project success and team member satisfaction, especially in unpaid roles where people contribute based on passion alone. Simple gestures like treating the team to dinner or coordinating flexible deadlines and resources helped acknowledge their efforts and boost morale.

For the negative side, however, managing people is often the most challenging aspect of leadership. Transitioning from one team to another, whether in a school setting or a professional environment, requires adaptability. One difficulty I encountered was motivating people who were not being paid, relying instead on passion and belief. In addition, as a project manager, I was responsible for assigning leaders for sub-teams, but I often took too long to assess individuals and occasionally made poor decisions, which slowed down progress. During my internship, I also realized that one major drawback of my earlier experiences was the lack of a standardized process, which hampered efficiency in both my high school and undergraduate teams.

Going forward, I aim to improve in two key areas. First, I want to develop a more efficient framework to standardize team processes, which would ensure smoother operations and faster progress. Second, I plan to improve the methods used to validate whether our current progress aligns with our ultimate goals, ensuring that we stay on track and achieve the desired outcomes.