Motivating Your Team

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Not the Droids You Are Looking For (Pennsylvania, USA)

I have coached a FIRST LEGO League team for six years - large teams and small teams. Each team and each student is motivated differently. For some, playing with LEGO is all they want or joined for. So how do you encourage the kids to learn all that FIRST LEGO League has to offer them?

Creating a badge system: When I had a large team with mixed interest levels, I used patches (much like Boy Scout Merit badge systems) as prizes for learning new skills. I used a large sheet poster paper and put the names of the kids on the top and the various skills they could learn on the side. I created little packets for them to place their patch in as they earned them. I included a photo of this chart in this article.

What skills do they learn? In the picture on the left, I have Teamwork, Determination, Bright Idea!, Oops, Early Bird, Organized, and Note taking. Most of them speak for themselves, but some are worth talking about.

The "Oops" patch was given when students made a mistake, but could learn from the mistake. I wanted the kids on the team to learn that it was okay to make mistakes in FIRST LEGO League. "Early Bird" was given as an encouragement to get their work done ahead of time. "Note taking" was given out to encourage the students to take notes when we went on field trips or interviewed someone.

When each child completed their column, they received an even large FIRST patch. When the entire team completed all all their patches, they all celebrated together with a movie and pizza.

Alternative Systems: While I gave out physical patches that the kids could keep, you can always substitute this with a sticker or electronic badge system. You could be as high-level or specific as you want. For example, I focused on "additional skills from FLL" – time management, determination, teamwork, note taking, etc. But this system could work even for specific programming skills: line following, turning, gyro, etc.

Where can I purchase these patches? I got most of mine from Advantage Emblem (https://www.advantageemblem.com/). I purchased their stock patches (existing patches). If you have a large budget, you can even create your own custom ones. I purchased the FIRST patch from Adafruit (https://www.adafruit.com/products/488). It appears that they no longer carry this patch.

Be flexible. You might also find that it is not patches that motivates your team. A lot depends on their age, gender and interests. When you have a team of mixed ability and interest, finding some way to encourage all the kids is important. So if you find that the students lack motivation, put some thought into what would work best for your team. It might be a special LEGO brick, robot cookies, a team trip to a special location, etc.

"Find what motivates the kids on your team: pizza, a movie , patches…"