Tamer Marzouk

The adventures of an IT leader

Building the IT service portfolio from the ground up

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THE ADVENTURES OF AN IT LEADER
BUILDING THE IT SERVICE PORTFOLIO FROM THE GROUND UP

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my professors and supervisors:

Your guidance enlightens my vision and encouraged me to progress into my leadership endeavour. I am so grateful to you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tamer Marzouk is the Founder/CEO of Skyline Training and Consulting Services, a start-up company he founded after earning over 20 years of professional experience in management consulting and personal and professional development. Skyline vision is "To be the go to platform for human development for everyone who is looking for a chance to prove self but falls short of the right opportunity." Skyline mission is "Helping you realize your potentials regardless of the challenges or obstacles." Skyline values are "Connect | Lead | Unbound | Write".

Tamer holds a master's degree in computer science and a master's degree in business administration from the American University of Cairo. He's affiliated with multiple professional associations: ISACA and IIBA, and DRI. Tamer is actively engaged with these associations on various levels and capacities.

As a practitioner researcher, Tamer has written several research papers. One of them is about the role of professional associations in the societal development. Another paper is about the digital transformation in Canada, opportunities and challenges.

Tamer is a natural leader driven by a sincere sense of responsibility to engage, serve and contribute, and to share knowledge and experience using various channels and media. In this context, Tamer publicly speaks in webinars on topics covering technology and professional/personal development. In addition, Tamer has a solid presence across all major social media platforms.

Tamer has multiple e-books published on Amazon and almost 100 articles published on LinkedIn, IT World Canada, IT Business Canada and other online platforms. As a researcher, Tamer has written several research papers, analytical reports and case studies.

Tamer is continuously looking to network and connect with other like-minded professionals. In the next few years, Tamer plans to develop his leadership skills through learning, analyzing, and applying his expertise and knowledge to help find creative solutions to problems such as unemployment.

INTRODUCTION

Within the leadership context, I should recognize two of my distinguished professors in the MBA program: Prof. Akabawi and Prof. O'Connell for their guidance, insights and reflections when it comes to putting leadership concepts and theorems into practice.

If you are an MBA student taking an information systems management course, you might be familiar with the textbook "The Adventures of an IT Leader" published by HBR. Originally published in 2009, the book tells a story of a CFO who has to back-fill the empty seat of a CIO. The interesting and engaging story illustrates the challenges the CFO has to face on a daily basis, the first is to operate such a large IT organization and the second is to keep a number of open critical projects running according to schedules with approaching deadlines. The book is an excellent read for both IT and non-IT professionals.

Back in 2013, we had it as a reading assignment, but for me it meant more than just an assignment and it has always been at the back of my mind since then. At the time, I never imagined that I would return to it not as a reader but as a writer.

That being said, what drives me to write this book? Here is how I contrast the two books:

The Context, The Leader, and The Challenge

1. The Context

The activities of the other book was running in a well-established organization and a large running business for some time. While the context of this book is a start-up with an evolving business model and organizational structure trying to establish connections and links to the external business environment.

2. The Leader

The leader of the other book came from a leadership role from within the same organization but from the business unit, while the emerging leader of this book comes from outside the organization.

3. The Challenge

The leader of the other book had no prior experience in IT Service Portfolio Management. This was the fundamental challenge facing that leader. While the emerging leader of this book comes from the IT Service organization but with no prior leadership at such a large scale.

The bottom line is that both leaders had to creatively develop unique strategies and tactics to stand the challenges and survive their adventures respectively.

Today, I find myself excited to share my insights and reflections in a book featuring the challenges and qualities of IT leaders. Being part of an adventure is something exciting, joyful and opens the door to imagination. If you are a risk taker, indulging in adventures is second nature. As you might agree, in adventure movies the excitement is proportional to suspense and happens when you have no idea what will happen next. (Disney's UP is my personal favorite)

Are you ready to lead?

Building IT Service Portfolio in a medium to large scale organization is by far the ultimate leadership experience every IT professional aspires to, specially in a startup. Startups by all means constitute a very rich and highly dynamic context for learning and development.

In "The Adventures of an IT Leader" I reflect on a 9 months of practical leadership experience across three leadership dimensions: The Context, The Challenge and The Qualities. The key takeaway is that the human aspect of leadership outweighs the technical one.

Whether you have a technical background or not this book is for you. The book is a guide and a handbook with 10s of situational challenges, resolutions and lessons learned for both seasoned and aspiring leaders as well as entrepreneurs.

Enjoy your adventure…

PART I: IT SERVICE PORTFOLIO MANAGEMENT

THE ADVENTURES OF AN IT LEADER

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE "THE FOUNDER" OF
THE IT SERVICE PORTFOLIO IN A START-UP?

1 WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE "THE FOUNDER" OF THE IT SERVICE PORTFOLIO IN A START-UP?

The IT Service depends on People, Technology and Process. Accordingly, the founder/leader will likely go through a journey as outlined below.

People (the Team):

As the Founder, you will lead the team within a highly uncertain context with very low visibility. Be ready to:

- Design the main functions of the department
- Create and structure the Org Chart
- Develop team job descriptions
- Announce the positions and interview candidates
- Design and outline the office space for the department.

As the Manager/Leader/Coach:

- Lead and coach the team
- Motivate the team during tense and stress times, which are varied
- Build the team and handle conflicts
- Follow up team activities/progress on a daily, weekly, monthly and quarterly basis
- Prepare training and development plan
- Perform performance evaluation and appraisal
- Prepare leave planning.

Make sure everyone in the team is fully in control of their duties and responsibilities as outlined in the job description and with additional assignments as mandated by business needs. The result is building a team of confident professionals.

Technology: Setting the technical blueprint is as exciting as hiring the team. From the technology perspective, expect there are tens of open projects and that many will be stacked in the pipeline.

THE ADVENTURES OF AN IT LEADER

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Framework: ITIL (Information Technology Infrastructure Library) should be in mind as the foundation of the service model you will be offering.

Infrastructure: look into various components such as: Internet, Network, Systems (software/hardware), Security/Safety.

Information Systems: this would be your start: ERP (Enterprise resource planning), and Web applications.

Operation/Support: develop a support plan covering different user groups and aspects. The help-desk will be evolving as you go.

Suppliers Relationship/SCM: to develop and maintain your relationships with vendors/suppliers/contractors. This is more critical than you think.

Process: Mainly concerned with workflow and is manifested by governance.

Governance: from day one, start putting Policies, SOPs and BCP/DR. It is easier in the beginning than later.

The following two dimensions go hand-in-hand with People, Technology and Process:
1. **Leadership** expertise formulating vision/mission/strategy while leading different stakeholders; both internal: peers, supervisors, subordinates, as well as external.
   Leadership skills: strategy development, team building, delegation, empowerment, coaching, planning, organization, decision making.
   Management Consulting Skills: Project Management, Business Process Improvement, Quality Control.
2. **Soft skills**: time management, stress management, conflict, negotiation, communication, presentation, networking, adaptability. The list goes on…
   This is an enormous development experience on both professional and personal levels that is enriched through three pillars: mistakes, constraints and mindfulness learning.

The bottom line: as the founder you will come across different platforms and technologies as well as different personalities and cultures.

2   THE 101 OF IT SERVICE PORTFOLIO MANAGEMENT

IT Service Management is like a big puzzle. To solve the puzzle you need some clues, hints or a road-map.

Below, I illustrate the various pieces of the IT Service Management puzzle, as well as the road-map and clues to help you put the pieces together and hopefully solve the puzzle.

As an IT Service Manager, your role is twofold: Technical Expertise and Leadership.

Technical expertise: you will capitalize on your past experience to draft and outline the blueprint for the stages of evolution of the IT Service Portfolio you are building. Also, you will transform these stages into building blocks of the IT Service capabilities. As you build and manage your portfolio, you will be exposed to a wealth of technologies and brands. You will come across several checkpoints where you have to make decisions according to the context you are working in.

On the other hand, you will be leading a team of professionals. Here comes your **leadership expertise**. For your team members you will be the mentor, coach and facilitator. As you lead the team, it is important to develop them through empowerment. Also, as a leader, you should be ready for the challenges you might face and be aware of the personal qualities you need to help you stand such challenges.

To build the IT Service from the ground up is an opportunity not everyone is blessed with. If you are the founder, you will be involved in additional sets of activities, details and complexities, or adventures as I prefer to call them!

As an IT Service Manager, continuous personal and professional development goes without saying. You should know what your core competencies are, understand the sources of expertise, and continuously develop your expertise.

As the IT Service Manager, you exemplify a lifelong learner mindset. You should keep an eye on the pillars of developing your leadership skills as well as keep track of the lessons that you come across on daily basis.

As the IT Service Manager, you will be wearing several hats. You should always be seen as the solution provider. You should enjoy your role as the generalist looking into all functions across the IT Service landscape.

3   6 BUILDING BLOCKS OF IT SERVICE IN A START-UP

In an article on LinkedIn, I highlighted 10 Decisions You have to take While building IT Service Capabilities in a start-up. In this article, six building blocks complement and add up to the rationale and logic behind coming up with those decisions.

1. **Vision/Strategy**
   - The IT Service vision should be aligned with and enable that of the business.
   - The strategy draws the path towards achieving this vision.
2. **Manpower: Team/HR**
   - Organisational chart featuring the main functions that the IT Service will deliver
   - Job Descriptions and Recruitment to build the team in charge of delivering the IT Service
3. **Equipment: Back-end Infrastructure**
   Connectivity:
   - Internet & Mobile coverage
   - Network (Voice & Data, Wired & WiFi)
   - Call Manager/Center
   Systems & Utility S/W:
   - Operating and Database Systems
   - Office Productivity/Communication/Collaboration tools
   Systems H/W:
   - Servers (Traditional and/or Converged)
   - Storage and Backup solutions
   Applications:
   - Core Business Information Systems
   - ERP and Web/Mobile Applications
   Security:
   - Logical: Anti-virus, Firewall
   - Physical: Access Control and CCTV
4. **Equipment: Front-end Computing equipment**:
   - Printers and Copiers
   - PCs and Mobile Devices (Mobile Phones, Laptops, Thin-clients, Tablets)

5. **Front-end Technical Support**
   - Regular User Support Requests
   - Incident and Problem Troubleshooting
6. **Help-Desk**
   - Issue Tracking and Reporting
7. **Governance**
   - Policies, Standard Operating Procedures
   - Operation Plans

Optimally, building blocks 2 to 6 should start and go in parallel just after the vision/mission and strategy are formulated. In start-ups it is highly likely that business constraints, mostly financial ones, might interfere with achieving this objective. As a result, some blocks might lag behind others depending on the limiting constraints. A thorough risk analysis might be useful in these situations to expose the hidden cost behind such out of sync progression.

In addition to the six building blocks demonstrated here, you may refer to the 5 stages of building the IT Service capabilities. These five stages provide an illustration of ITIL Framework as a reflection of my first-hand experience.

4 5 STAGES OF BUILDING IT SERVICE CAPABILITIES IN A START-UP

Like any service offering, IT Service passes through different stages until it reaches the target consumer. Below, I reflect on my experience operating IT Service capabilities in a start-up. As I have seen it, there are five stages:

Stage 1: Assessment/Development/Blueprint

In this stage, you formulate the mission/vision of the IT Service function. You will formulate the strategy which will be the basis for the decisions to be taken in the next stage. You will need to design the Org Chart suitable for the type of service you are going to offer.

Stage 2: Foundation/Starting/Realization

In this stage, you will start the process of hiring the team.

Also, you will kick off major infrastructure projects across the different service delivery layers (mostly the back-end). In this stage, you will prepare the support/help-desk team to be able to deliver the front-line services.

Stage 3: Operation/Stabilization

In this stage, you will deliver your services through the various channels you have established in the previous stage: whether remotely or on site, online or via email/phone.

Distribution of work activities and operation planning and scheduling are critical in this stage especially for support activities.

Things to consider as you operate: Planning team leaves and Plan for service outage/maintenance. Also, monitor issues/frequencies as this will be used in the next stage.

Stage 4: Improvement/Tuning

In this stage, as you have been watching and monitoring the operation and collecting customer feedback, you pin point issues, conflicts, now you will take corrective actions.

Review your policies, procedures, operation plans, if you already have one, if not then this is the time to draft yours. Here, I am adding a 5th stage to stress the importance of scalability as the start-up moves into a growth phase.

Stage 5: Expansion/Scaling

In this stage, as your business grows, your service offering should grow in proportion to accommodate additional buildings/customers/employees. More capacity is needed in different service offering segments:

The Team: Hire more resources in the support teams

The Infrastructure: Scale up your infrastructure. This might include, for example, increasing the Internet capacity, adding additional user licenses in your subscriptions or support contracts.

These stages can be followed in sequence or individually targeted. For sure you will revisit and go through all these stages as the need arises. The frequency and the level of details varies depending on the scenario under consideration.

A final remark: If you are familiar with ITIL, you would have noticed that these stages are naturally aligned, at an abstract level, with ITIL Service Life-cycle.

5 10 DECISIONS YOU HAVE TO TAKE WHILE BUILDING IT SERVICE CAPABILITIES IN A START-UP

The early days and months in a start-up are full of choices and each will be a basis for a long commitment to come. While building a start-up IT infrastructure from the ground up I had to face the following ten choices and accordingly take ten associated decisions:

Here, I list choices/decisions of the main IT Services building blocks grouped by three: Infrastructure, Information Systems, Computing Equipment

Infrastructure:

1. Network Connectivity
   - Pre WiMax versus Microwave, where a Landline wasn't an option.
2. Server Infrastructure
   - Cloud versus On-Prem
   - If On-Prem: would it be Hyper Converged versus Blade or Traditional Rack mounted servers
3. Hosting services such as emails, website, etc.
   - Cloud service versus On-Prem

Information Systems:

4. ERP vs. Standalone IS
   - HR, FI, SCM standalone systems versus Integrated modules in an ERP
5. Proprietary vs. Open Source
   - ERP: SAP, MS, Oracle, versus OpenNext, OpenERP…
   - This also applies to office productivity and collaboration utility/tools
6. Global Brand vs. Local
   - A branded solution versus a local solution that provides the same functionality and features, yet not popular

7. Outsource vs. In house
    - This applies to various development initiatives such as websites and web, mobile applications. Also, for services such as Copy Centers.

Computing Equipment:

8. Rent vs. Buy and New vs. Refurbished
    - For example: Printing equipment and in some cases back-end Infrastructure
    - If new would it be paid upfront or through a funding agency.
9. Enterprise/Business category vs. Commercial
    - Laptops and PCs (High end versus Mainstream)
10. Thin-Client vs. Traditional PC
    - Would a Thin-Client be adequate, or a fully-fledged computer is better.

You might not face all of them but at least Point 5 would be relevant to most IT Services in start-up environments. Every single decision is translated in dollars, so be wise.

One last word about the team: Involving the team in the decision-making process is the key element for coming up with as many optimal decisions as possible. Do you keep your team involved in your decision-making process? You are most welcome to add up to this list.

PART II: THE CHALLENGES FACING THE LEADER

6   10 CHALLENGES FACING IT LEADERS IN A START-UP

As an IT leader appointed to manage various contexts and environments, I had to face multiple concurrent challenges. From my perspective, challenges are opportunities to learn. Accordingly, I set my mind and devised my strategy and countermeasures to defeat challenges in single or in groups.

Here is a roster of the key challenges I had to face throughout my leadership endeavours along with description and countermeasures:

1. In a start-up context, the **building structure** is by far the most outstanding challenge How will you handle the following challenges? There are no core offices or functions such as finance, HR or supply chain. Also, there may be no policies, procedures, or guidelines. In addition, you are facing uncertain demands and ad hoc requests.

2. In a start-up you will lead tens of **concurrent, yet urgent open projects**
You might be asked to lead projects irrelevant to core IT services in addition to that important IT service work. From backend infrastructure projects, logical and physical access control to front end marketing, customer facing applications and services – you name it.

3. In a start-up, it is really challenging if you don't have a good grasp of critical soft skills such as **assertiveness and presentation skills**
Being able to communicate with various stakeholders, defend your argument and present your ideas in a clear understandable format is very critical and challenging if you don't have the required communication skills.

4. In a start-up, **team building and managing team dynamics** add to your challenges, especially on a tight schedule where resources are not immediately available. You need to handle issues such as hiring suitable staff, manage prospects' expectations, prepare training and development plans and set the proper conflict resolution mechanisms.

5. **Finance and budget constraints, exchange rate changes, taxes**
Financing a start-up is definitely a challenge for the sponsor/developer who is desperately looking for a return on investment. After spending money to build up the business to a certain extent, the sponsor/developer can be reluctant to put in more money. This challenge limits and slows down further developments in the project. Add to this the changes in the financial market illustrated in new imposed taxes or exchange rates.

6. **Regulation, and official documents**

   For start-ups, getting certificates from authorities might be challenging, especially if the inauguration is linked to a season or a business opportunity. A delay in the official documents or certificates means lost opportunities and unavoidable financial losses which in turn limits and slows down further developments in the project.

7. **Managing stakeholders' expectations**

   In a start-up, stakeholders are many and diverse. For example: Suppliers are key stakeholders with high expectations when it comes to expected business opportunities with start-ups. Internal team members are critical stakeholders with high expectations and aspiration for the new business. In addition, there's the traditional management perception of IT as a cost center and not as a key ingredient in the service portfolio of the business and a contributor in revenue generation.

8. **Breaks and public holidays**

   It goes without saying that start-ups run under tight schedules and limited resources and can't afford delays caused by breaks and holidays. In addition to the financial implications, breaks sometimes affect stakeholders' momentum and hinder progress.

9. **Competition**

   For start-ups, market penetration is a real challenge. Sustainability is another concern that needs proper planning. Having a sound differentiation strategy and a product mix is inevitable within a fierce competitive market.

10. **Centralization of decision making**

    Most start-ups share this common challenge where the chain of command is centralized which is considered a bottleneck that might hinder and impact the workflow.

    Two key countermeasures that proved to be successful in this start-up context are based on a phased approach. Both were my basis toward leading in such a challenging context. This will be elaborated in upcoming chapters.

The Ultimate Challenge: Leading People

- **Hiring the team**
- **Building the team**
- **Managing the team**
- **Conflict Resolution within the team**
- **Empowering the team**

7   THE #1 LESSON OF HIRING: HIRING THROUGH YOUR NETWORK

When it comes to hiring, building the IT team in a start-up means that you don't have the luxury of time compared to other operation businesses. You have a very tight hiring window to recruit, short list, interview, and select. The aim is to build a team that will be able to provide the service within a few weeks before the business opens its door to prospective customers/clients.

This was the challenge I had to face and this is how I practiced and experienced "Hiring through First-hand Networking". The end result was that five out of nine team members where hired through my network. This took some of the hiring pressure off and gave me more room to hire the rest of the team.

What is networking? Generally speaking, networking is getting to know people outside your family and friends. The aim is sharing information, contacts, ideas, advice, and resources.

In the context of job search, networking for recruitment is the most important type of networking activities.

Why is it important?
Statistics says that networking is cited as the number one way to get a job. The results of a survey say that 85% of jobs are filled through networking. As simple as that.

The Art of Effective Networking
Below is an important key when it comes to effective networking. It isn't a matter of initiating a conversation or meeting people and sharing contact information, what is more important is how to maintain this relationship. That is the hardest part.

Social Networking
Technology and Social networks have revolutionized networking. For example, you can reach people all over the world in different time zones. You can attend an event or a webinar by the click of a mouse. You no longer need to leave your desk to engage in a networking event or activity.

Networking isn't only for job seekers, but also for hiring managers. It is critical for every hiring manager to check the status of their network and be ready for upcoming hiring challenges under tight time frames.

8   THE #2 LESSON OF HIRING: ATTITUDE COMES FIRST

As the hiring manager for an entire IT team, I had the full authority to select my team members. I was hiring in a very tight time frame and I had to get the team hitting the ground very quickly so I was interviewing between four and eight applicants daily.

Originally, I prepared the job description for each position, then I had to review the resumes of the applicants to shortlist them for each of the vacant positions. While it was a good opportunity to interview a wide array of IT professionals applying for those open positions, it was a challenge to select from the large applicant pool knowing that the hiring window was very tight.

The shortlisted applicants' skills varied and their expectations varied as well. Luckily most of them were meeting the requested technical skills and some of them even exceeded them. For me, the key qualifier was the attitude of the applicant and whether he/she would be a good fit or not. I was hiring for the attitude.

Why is attitude so important?

By definition, attitude is a settled way of thinking or feeling about someone or something, typically one that is reflected in a person's behavior.

> *Attitude is both our best friend and our worst enemy. It is more honest and more consistent than our words. It is a manner which draws people to us, or repels them. It is never content unless it is expressed. It is the librarian of our past, the speaker of our present, and the prophet of our future. Yet, who controls our attitude?*
>
> *– Bob Urichuck*

Attitude dictates how you react, how you think, what you say to yourself or what you believe about yourself.

Examples of good attitude in the workplace:

- Respectfulness
- Enthusiastic
- Excellence
- Commitment
- Innovation
- Efficient
- Early
- Helpfulness
- Easy

Attitude problems are getting much attention for several reasons:

1. It is difficult to change attitude but easier to train skills and aptitude
2. Attitude may affect overall employee performance
3. Workplace challenges are easily handled with the right attitude.

It is very important to consider attitude when hiring. Attitude comes first, before technical skills.

9   THE #3 LESSON OF HIRING: THE OVERQUALIFIED

Overqualification: This is a real issue for both the qualified job seekers and the hiring manager.

Knowing the tight job market, it is really disappointing for job seekers to receive this rejection feedback: "You are overqualified"

On the other hand, a hiring manager worries that hiring an overqualified professional might lead to them leaving quickly on finding a more suitable opportunity or cause attitude troubles within the team.

What is overqualification?

It is having qualifications that exceed the requirements of a particular job. Overqualification might be in terms of age, skills, or both.

The debate: Should I hire an overqualified applicant?

Pros:

- Overqualified workers would seem to be a bonus
- Overqualified workers would go beyond expectations and engage in job enriching
- Overqualified workers will excel in the role and accomplish things you never before thought you could get from that role
- Overqualified workers add much more value than less experienced ones because they tend to be more mature, loyal, and stable.

Cons:

- Overqualified workers will cause a retention issue
- Overqualified workers will be bored and eager to move on to something more challenging, and sometimes
- Overqualified workers are desperate for a paycheck right now and will leave when something better comes along

I hired two overqualified team members. Both were of great value not only to the team but for the whole workplace. They were a valuable resource when it came to meeting a deadline or resolving an outstanding issue. Both brought their experience which was very helpful in different occasions.

If there was an issue, I would say that they were seniors accepting junior positions due to a tight job market. Occasionally, there was friction with other juniors within the team as the seniors were trying to practice their seniority, despite this not being part of their job descriptions. This was something I had to manage using several team building tactics. Other than that, I really welcome the idea of hiring overqualified professionals.

Conclusion: Not all overqualified candidates are the same. Every job applicant should have an equal opportunity to be accepted. Give a chance to your candidates to be interviewed. In different workplace environments, for instance start-ups, overqualified people are a plus. Your job as the hiring manager is to figure out what you prefer.

Now, it is your turn:

- As the hiring manager, would you hire an overqualified candidate?
- As a job seeker, would you apply for a job you are overqualified for?

10 THE #1 RESPONSIBILITY OF A TEAM LEADER

> Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.
>
> – Henry Ford

Challenges facing founders and leaders are numerous. Once you are done with hiring your team, the next challenge is: team building.

Conflict within the team

Forming a team of professionals means that conflict within newly created teams is unavoidable. Bringing professionals from different workplaces and getting them to work together needs deliberate thought, especially in a start-up workplace where structure is built step by step daily.

Team Dynamics

In a start-up there are no clear procedures, policies or workflows. As a result, conflict will be the status quo especially within a newly formed team of professionals joining the start-up workplace. Within this highly dynamic context the floor is wide open to the extent team members step over each other's toes. Traffic control is needed. Here comes the pressing need for team building.

Team Building

By definition, it is "the process of turning a group of individual employees into a cohesive team, a group of people organized to work together interdependently and cooperatively to meet the needs of their customers by accomplishing their purpose and goals."

This process includes four stages and needs time and effort to get completed successfully.

Stage 1: **Forming**

The first stage is when the team is formed, and members meet. They learn what the team opportunities and challenges will be. Individual members may be confused about their role or not understand the need for the team. Members will agree on goals and assign actions for work, often working independently. Ground rules or team guidelines are established.

Stage 2: **Storming**

During the second stage, individual expression of ideas occurs and there is open conflict between members. Members tend to focus on details rather than the issues and compete for influence. Low trust among team members is an evident indicator of this stage.

Stage 3: **Norming**

In the third stage, the team develops work habits that support group rules and values. They use established tools and methods; exhibit good behaviors; mutual trust, motivation, and open communication increase; positive teamwork and group focus are apparent. The team relationships grow and individual characteristics are understood and appropriately utilized.

Stage 4: **Performing**

The fourth stage shows high levels of loyalty, participation, motivation, and group decision-making. Knowledge sharing, cross-training, and interdependence increases. Team is self-directing in development of plans and strategy to meet their goals and carry out work. Personal growth and sharing is encouraged throughout membership.

The Team Leader and team building

The team leader may be a member of the group, a supervisor, a manager, or a consultant who will facilitate the team-building process. The role of team leader evolves from one stage to another:

Stage 1: The team leader defines the ground rules. At this stage, the leader needs to be directive and understand the requirements for team training to move through each stage.

Stage 2: The leader sets the foundations to tolerance and patience between members. The leader guides the team towards clear goals, defined roles and acceptable team behavior.

Stage 3: The leader encourages participation and professionalism among the team members.

Stage 4: The team leader is more of a facilitator helping the team in communication processes and decides if there is a need to move back to a prior stage.

Team building activities

From indoor to outdoor, team building activities bring team members together to solve a common challenge in a fun atmosphere. These activities might include: Communication activities, problem solving/decision making activities, adaptability/planning activities, and building trust activities.

The main objective of these activities is to build unity, teamwork, trust, and improved group dynamics. After participating in these activities, the team will have much better trust, communication, and overall improved relationships.

Bottom line: team building is the responsibility of the whole team with more emphasis on the role of the team leader so remain patient, keep calm and be open to ideas as you build your team.

THE ADVENTURES OF AN IT LEADER

5 LESSONS LEARNED WHILE MANAGING A
TEAM OF DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS?

11 5 LESSONS LEARNED WHILE MANAGING A TEAM OF DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS?

Having a team of diverse age group was the outcome of the hiring process I led. The team could be classified according to age demographics in three groups:

- Juniors, less than five years of experience. They are very excited and energetic which might result in mistakes from time to time
- Seniors, more than ten years of experience. They are trying to supervise the juniors which might result in some friction and conflict.
- Middle-Age, between five and ten years of experience. They are neither juniors nor seniors.

Diversity in the workplace

Diversity in the workplace comes in different forms and flavors, one of them is age diversity. It is both interesting and challenging to observe and manage dynamics within each age group and between one group and the other.

For me the real challenge was:

- How to relate to each age groups?
- How do you motivate them?
- How to encourage them to share their knowledge?
- How to manage the different expectations of each group?

How do you manage age diversity within the team?
Here is my list of five best practices:

1. Encourage Collaboration & Teamwork
   Collaboration among different age group is the most critical aspect of crossing the generation gap.
   Assigning two or more team members on a project is often a good start to get the team accomplish more by working together. Also, it is important to establish a conflict resolution framework is important in approaching any conflict that might occur at

THE ADVENTURES OF AN IT LEADER

5 LESSONS LEARNED WHILE MANAGING A
TEAM OF DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS?

work. Assigning mentors within the team is a great way to manage generation gap in the workplace and facilitate cross-generational education and knowledge transfer.

2. Encourage a Supportive Culture

Appreciate your employees and the work they do. A supportive attitude can go a long way in the workplace…it can have direct effects on your employee engagement initiatives. Set an example. As a leader, behave in a way you want and the rest of the team will follow. Set the tone by establishing the consistencies, motivating and supporting team members.

It is important to treat the team members as you would like to be treated. Team members expect courtesy, respect, honesty, and tact – and rightly so. For a project to succeed, team members should feel valued and appreciated.

3. Adopt a Flexible Management Approach

Managing a team of more than just a few employees can be a difficult. By understanding that each generation of employees works in their own unique way will help you tailor your management style to each team member's personality, skills, and needs. Individuals within the team are unique. Understand everyone on your team, regardless of differences in age, geography or experience, to find out what makes them motivated and how they can best contribute.

You need to customize tasks and projects to your team member's strengths. Every employee serves a specific purpose in your team, as this is what helps make for an effective team.

Each task or project has an individual or group of people that is the right fit, and identifying these employees is the leader's task. When you have a task or project in front of you that needs to get done, allocating the right person to do it should be the first thing that comes to mind.

4. Communicate and Cultivate an Open-Door Policy

Communication helps team members be more comfortable with ambiguity. Leaders need to be seen to be listening to, and acting on, the concerns of their diverse teams. Give feedback to your team members as they need to understand how they are performing and this is even more important in a diversified team. A diverse team needs to be visible to each other to help generate better common understanding.

Sharing thoughts, feelings and rationale will help build the diversified team composed of different backgrounds. Being upfront about the situation and involving people as much as possible in decision making will establish a sense of inclusion and will ensure everyone feels part of the same team.

5. Be Willing to Learn, You can't know it all

One of the greatest things about working with professionals of different age groups is the chance to learn and develop leadership skills. Expect great ideas and solutions brought on by team members.

The biggest thing to remember here is to go into each day with an open mind, accepting ideas that might come to the table. Don't expect to be another know-it-all boss.

One aspect of learning from the team is learning their terminology and slang words. Terminology exists for every other generation, so it is important to pay attention and learn it. The best way you can learn how someone speaks is to interact with them on a daily basis. If you don't, you're going to find yourself running into confusion.

Creativity comes with Diversity

While challenging to manage, having a diverse a team of talented individuals laid the foundation to creativity within the team.

12 8 EFFECTIVE CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGIES

Conflict within workplace is inevitable. Conflict takes place within the same team or across members of different departments. As long are there is any sort of work dependencies, conflict will exist. Conflicts are a major source of distressing for employees and distraction from achieving business objectives.

Poorly managed conflicts have a cost attached to them. According to a [study](#) about the impact of conflict on the workplace, "U.S. employees spend 2.1 hours per week involved with conflict, which amounts to approximately $359 billion in paid hours (based on an average hourly earnings of $17.95), or the equivalent of 385 million working days."

What is conflict?

It has various definitions:

It is a state of disharmony between incompatible persons, ideas, or interests.

It is a process in which one part believes that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party.

What is Conflict in the workplace?

It is a disagreement through which the parties involved perceive a threat to their needs, interests or concerns.

It is an expression of dissatisfaction or disagreement with an interaction, process, product or service.

What is the scope of workplace conflicts?

Interpersonal Conflict: Between individuals

Intra-group Conflict: Within a team or a group

Inter-group Conflict: Between two or more groups or teams

Inter-organizational Conflict: Across the organization

What are the Types of Conflicts within the team?

Conflict can be over facts & data, process & methods, purpose, or values

- Conflict of Interest
- Conflict of Position
- Power Struggle
- Misunderstanding/Miscommunication

Why does conflict happen?

The main reason behind conflict is differences:

- Conflict of Attitudes: different Opinions
- Conflict of Aims: different Goals
- Conflict of Idea: different Interpretations
- Conflict of Behavior: different unacceptable Behaviors

As a team leader I experienced various reasons of conflicts in the workplace, for example:

1. Un-managed Over-Qualified resources within the team. Differences in age and skills.
2. Un-managed Diversity within the team. Differences in the interests and objectives.
3. Un-managed Cultural differences within the team. Differences in attitudes and backgrounds.

Yet, it is the leader responsibility to pay attention to and take measure to resolve conflict within your team. Putting effective measures to resolve conflicts are a top priority.

Is conflict good or bad?

Conflicts are not always a bad thing. It might be a symptom for a healthy work environment as well.

How to resolve conflict in the workplace

There are five Conflict Resolution Styles

Avoiding: Avoid having to deal with the conflict

Competing: Get your way

Compromising: Reach an agreement quickly

Accommodating: Don't upset the other person

Collaborating: Solve the problem together

It is important to keep in mind that selecting a suitable conflict resolution style should lead to best solution and achieve a win-win outcome

A properly resolved workplace conflict results in:

- Better relationship
- Improved self-respect
- Professional growth and development
- Enhanced efficiency and effectiveness
- Creative and non-traditional thinking
- Better synergy and teamwork

8 Strategies to Resolve Conflict in the Workplace:

1. Be proactive and encourage healthy relationship before conflict even occurs
2. Act on small problems before they escalate into conflicts
3. Encourage respect to diversity and boost acceptance of differences
4. Listen to the perspective of the involved parties to better understand the situation
5. Acknowledge feelings of the different parties
6. Focus on solving the root causes of the conflict
7. Seek help and advice if you can't solve the problem
8. Be flexible depending on the situation and persons involved

The bottom line is that conflict is a part of the workplace and must be handled professionally before it affects team performance and productivity.

13 #1 LESSON OF LEADING THE TEAM

Empowerment Vs. Micromanagement

Do I micromanage? At times, it is difficult for me to decouple from my technical background and find myself drawn into the technical details of a problem. In other situations, I fear the task/activity will not be done as it should be or as I would love it to be done.

In a start-up environment, I am not exaggerating to say there are tens of open projects/ activities that need continuous follow up to make sure progress is sustained. A one-man show isn't applicable in this context. Every team member is assigned a set of responsibilities and duties which grows in quantity and volume day after day. Micromanagement in this dynamic context is impossible by all means. From one side it will slow operation down. In addition, it will demotivate team members who already work in a highly stressful context. Eventually, this will impact the overall performance. I am a strong believer in Empowerment.

From one side, I appreciate empowerment and I already enjoyed being empowered early in my career. My managers and supervisors used to give me a wide range of freedom to make decisions and in turn this developed a great sense of responsibility. I learned from mistakes and this was a highly appreciated reward.

Empowerment is:

> *A management practice of sharing information, rewards, and power with employees so that they can take initiative and make decisions to solve problems and improve service and performance.*
>
> *– BD*

Yet, empowerment might lead to chaos, and eventually lack of control. Empowerment has its pitfalls and drawbacks. From the eyes of the workplace community it might be perceived that the manager isn't in charge when it comes to managing his/her team.

1. Some team members may not be ready to be empowered. Individuals may not be able to handle the increased stress that the added responsibility and decision-making will bring.

2. Some team members may take advantage of their new responsibility and abuse their power. Individuals might confuse empowerment and being able to make their own decisions with having the authority to do whatever they want.
3. Interpersonal relations within the workplace might suffer and conflict might rise. Conflicts occur within the team and among other members in the workplace, consequently, a hostile work environment may surface.
4. When team members are empowered, their confidence levels tend to increase, in some situations, end up crossing the line into arrogance. Arrogant individuals become difficult to deal with and eventually turns into insubordinate.

Guided Empowerment

To compensate for these downsides, governance within the team and when dealing with the community becomes imperative, especially in a start-up context. Policies, procedures and guidelines are highly recommended to maintain the balance between empowerment and micromanagement.

Team members need guidance so that their decisions fall in line with goals of the organization. Team members need the training, tools and guidance to be able to make decisions to produce quality work. Make sure that individuals are completely ready for their new responsibilities before they are assigned.

In conclusion:

1. Explain the big picture, scope and the expected outcome and let them know what they are required to deliver. Listen to them, know how they will perform.
2. Let them practice decision making in their day to day activities.
3. Continuous coaching along with frequent meetings and following up on their progress.

I admit that it has been a real challenge maintaining a balance between empowering the team members and making them abide by a framework to govern our interactions with the community. This argument might extend to a broader question: Which roles and procedures are enabling or blocking team development and overall business growth?

What do you think?

PART III: THE QUALITIES OF A SUCCESSFUL IT LEADER

14 10 QUALITIES OF SUCCESSFUL IT LEADERS

Leadership is both a challenge and a blessing. It is transformational in its core essence. It is a unique opportunity to turn a vision from abstract into material, from generic to specific, from dreams to realities.

Over the past years I have been in different IT leadership capacities, which provided a rich context for continuous personal and career development for peers, subordinates, supervisors as well as for myself.

Below, you will find **ten qualities of IT leaders** to illustrate my reflections and lessons learned which might shed the light on critical traits needed to succeed in such senior role.

1. **Patience**
   Leaders understand that things take and need time, specially in a start-up environment where no structure exists. Time is a critical factor, sometimes a challenging factor against a leader realizing a vision or a goal. Coping with delays and obstacles makes the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful leader.

2. **Creativity and innovation**
   Finding creative and innovative ways to solve challenges, constraints and obstacles is vital. Leaders face these daily, and applying innovative and creative tactics to handle obstacles is a key differentiator of a high caliber leader.

3. **Understanding and caring**
   Having a broader understanding of the motives, behaviors and rationales behind stakeholders' actions or reactions means a lot to the leader when it comes to decision-making and reacting to sudden and prompt events. In this context, emotionally intelligent leaders are the most successful leaders.

4. **Openness and transparency**
   Using various communication channels to be open and accessible with the team members and stakeholders breaks barriers and reduces misunderstanding. Transparency with the team will fortify relationships and minimize conflict.

5. **Sharing and involving**
   Getting everyone involved enriches the sense of responsibility needed to keep tasks, activities and projects moving with least follow-up and monitoring. Sharing concerns and issues and seeking input and feedback is a very helpful technique of building involvement. Also, keep the team engaged through team building, monitoring, follow ups, and continuous guidance, coaching meetings and workshops.

6. **Dedication and commitment**

Passion is all that is needed for a leader to be successful. Passionate leaders allocate countless hours and abundance of effort. A passionate leader will arrive early before anyone in the team and will leave later than everyone else. Commitment and dedication are contagious. This is a very good leading-by-example lesson.

7. **Decentralization and empowerment**

Leaders don't work alone. They develop leaders through empowerment and decentralization, which enhances a sense of commitment within the team and opens the door for team development and growth. Decentralization is a true measure of successful leadership. A leader eager to empower team members will definitely gain commitment in return.

8. **Contextual and resourceful**

Know your stakeholders and manage their expectations. Context-aware leaders successfully manage stakeholder expectations. Among key stakeholders are team members. Know the capacity of your team and make use of it, develop it, nurture it, encourage extracurricular activities among your team. All this transforms an ordinary leader into a resourceful leader.

9. **Skillful**

To succeed, leaders need a bunch of skill sets. Leaders should be highly organized, with superior time management skills. Presentation and communication skills are a game changer.

Last but not least, the **IT leader is a lifelong learner**. I can't emphasis the importance of this trait enough. Seeking knowledge and wisdom is a key ingredient of the leader success formula.

From my point of view, these qualities are the driving forces which keep leaders motivated and moving forward.

15 THE LEADER AS A FACILITATOR

While in one of my regular meetings with solution providers, I recalled an article which featured the role of contemporary Leader.

The article highlights two facts:

Fact 1: Today's leaders aren't masters when it comes to the various functions/specializations within the team they lead. The article states that "Knowledge workers are people who know more about what they are doing than their boss does."

As an IT leader managing a team of nine professionals, with scope spanning both back-end functions (application, systems, applications and security) and front-end functions (help-desk and technical support) I wouldn't claim that I know the details and the how-to of every function or system feature of my team members. I don't know how to configure our video streaming codec or write a piece of code using Angular J. I would love to, as a life-long learner, but I no longer have the time nor the capacity to take this further.

Fact 2: Today's leaders are facilitators

Back to my meeting: there were three attendees. One of my team members, a solution provider and myself. The discussion was addressing technical details of a solution we intended to implement. Initially, I provided an ice-breaker introduction. As the meeting unfolded, argumentative points were popping up and the conversation was becoming hot. I was jumping in to rephrase, summarize, and sometimes enforce some ground rules. Finally, I made a briefing and conclusion with an action plan. My role as a meeting facilitator was becoming clear and obvious.

16 6 LEADERSHIP STYLES: COACHING

A while ago, I attended one of my kids' basketball games. As I was watching, I started to notice the team coach standing on the line watching the movements of his team players, giving directions, encouraging good passes and shouting against wrong ones.

At the same moment, I recalled one of the interesting movies I have seen some time ago about a basketball coach, "Coach Carter". This is a very inspiring and motivational movie about a transformational coach, a leader, who transformed a group of low-grade student members of an uncooperative basketball team into successful students and a league-winning team. If highly recommend it. It brought my attention to the analogy between the coach and the leader. What is the difference between them?

What is a coach?

Coaching is a useful way of developing people skills and abilities, and of boosting performance. It can also help deal with issues and challenges before they become major problems. Coaching commonly addresses attitudes, behaviors and knowledge, as well as skills, and can also focus on physical and spiritual development. The coach helps the individual to improve their own performance: in other words, helping them to learn.

What is a leader?

> 1. "A good leader takes a little more than his share of the blame, a little less than his share of the credit."
>
> *– Arnold Glasow*

> 2. "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."
>
> *– Martin Luther King Jr.*

> 3. "A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves."
>
> *– Lao Tzu*

All these definitions point to the coach. By definition, a leader coaches and builds a team in order for it to be more effective at achieving a certain vision or a target. The leader coach doesn't play the game, and instead prepares and trains the team players for when it's time to play. The leader coach is not only responsible for the game's technical aspect but also for the emotional, psychological and mental aspects. There are many theories that describe leadership styles. Interestingly and amazingly enough, one of them, Goleman, lists coaching as a leadership style, which I prefer and practice on daily basis.

17 ARE YOU AN INQUISITIVE LEADER?

If you ask me, the most important skill a leader needs is to be inquisitive.

Leaders should ask questions not just get information but learn from those they lead.

– Tanveer Nasser

Dealing with different stakeholders, team members, suppliers, vendors, peers and supervisors, you need to bring in an inquisitive mindset either to understand a new requirement or to investigate an issue.

What does "inquisitive" mean?

An inquisitive person is one whose brain is always buzzing with questions. According to the Thesaurus, the word has many meanings, but two were highlighted: **Nosy** and **Analytical.**

Why is it important?

Being inquisitive is a much-needed skill not only in leadership roles but in most professions. Some jobs require a high degree of inquisitiveness, for example forensics.

How do you develop this important skill?

By nature we are all born with high levels of curiosity. By all means, kids enjoy the highest levels of curiosity. But as we grow older this skill is negatively affected.

- Have an open mind. Do something different and do things differently
- Don't take things for granted. Question everything. Ask questions relentlessly. There are no stupid questions
- Look for the positive in difficult and challenging situations
- Nothing is boring. "I'm Bored" should be removed from your vocabulary. Be an expert interested in all sorts of knowledge
- Be a lifelong learner and you will see learning as fun. Visit bookstores or libraries
- Enrich your mind with the minds of others. Read varied material. Widen your reading scope and follow your interests.

Being inquisitive is more of a survival skill in today's competitive marketplace and society.

18 WHY VISION IS NOT SUFFICIENT FOR A LEADER TO SURVIVE

A core attribute or trait of leadership is **vision**. "*Every leader has to be able to see "the dawn of a new day before the rest of the world*." ([Marquez Hughley](#)) But for a leader to keep the momentum and travel on a journey filled with obstacles and challenges, he/she should be equipped with the following four pillars: **Vision, Mission, Passion** and **Purpose**.

Passion

Passion is the connection to something, someone, someplace or some activity that gets the best out of you. Finding our passion is the beginning of discovering our purpose which gives meaning to our life. Passionate leaders discover and develop other leaders.

Vision

It is the gift to visualize the future and live it today. The more focused a vision is, the higher the chances to realize such vision. Visionary leaders attract and consolidate effort behind crystal clear objectives.

Mission

Mission is what gives life to the vision. Mission answers the question of How-to realize said vision. Missionary leaders are able to craft a solid action plan with measurable milestones to materialize it.

Passion, **Vision**, and **Mission** are the sides of the Magic Triangle for leading a purposeful life.

19 WHAT IT MEANS FOR A LEADER TO BE HUMBLE

I was once told that I was humble after a meeting on service improvements. Later, I asked myself: **what does it mean for a leader to be humble?**

Researching the topic, I came across this definition in a HBR article:

> "Your end goal is what we can do together to problem-solve. I've contributed my piece, and then I step back." It is not just humility in creating space for others to contribute, it's "intellectual humility. Without humility, you are unable to learn."
>
> – Google's SVP of People Operations, Lazlo Bock

In a Business News Daily review, Angela Sebaly, co-founder and CEO of Personify Leadership, defines humility it as follows: it "simply means understanding your strengths and weaknesses and recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of others. Humble leaders are focused on the big picture of mission and team rather than themselves."

Why must a leader be humble?

Humility might not be the first quality that comes to mind when you think of leadership skills, but studies are showing that it is one of the most vital characteristics of successful leaders.

How do you reach humble leadership?

Selflessness is the only path to humble leadership.

Why is it needed?

Humility is associated with the ability to learn and grow: those are two core qualities of leadership.

Do humble leaders get things done? Yes.

According to a study, researchers surveyed 1,500 employees across six countries. The [study](#) found the following: "The kinder leadership – what they called altruistic leadership – was a critical factor in creating an inclusive work environment. Such environments yield higher engagement and more innovative ideas, and therefore a performance edge for their organisations."

A humble, selfless leader should not be mistaken for a weak one. Humble leaders should embrace a selfless leadership style: humble leadership is where an individual grows and learns from interaction/observation/admitting their flaws.

Being a "leader" shouldn't prevent you from being a good "follower." Share your mistakes as lessons learned. Appreciate uncertainty. Participate in conversations with the objective to listen more than you speak.

20 WHAT HAPPENS WHEN LEADERS LEAVE?

This question came to me after reading that John Terry was leaving Chelsea as captain.

Why do leaders leave?

Leaders leave for various reasons. Sometimes they leave according to a succession plan, a completion of a project or an endeavor, pursuing another challenge or seeking another opportunity, or due to cultural misfit.

> *"Anytime someone leaves a work group it's disruptive to the group but when a senior leader leaves, the organizational shock waves can really knock you back."*
>
> *– Next Bridge*

What happens after the leader leaves?

I have experienced two different scenarios:

- First, as a team member, where my boss was leaving
- Second, as a leader who was leaving.

A leader's departure affects various stakeholders:

- Internal stakeholders: fundamentally the team, peers and supervisors
- External stakeholders: customers, vendors, and suppliers.

Out of all stakeholders, the **team** is the most affected by the leader's departure. As the leader leaves, the team might be in an unsteady state fluctuating from worry, to excitement, panic, confusion and wonder.

*"The final test of a leader is that he leaves behind him in
other men the conviction and the will to carry on."*

– Walter Lippman

Leaders create leaders

Leaders, by default, plan ahead for the moment when they will leave their position. What is important is the legacy they will leave behind: leaders. As you leave, it is of most importance to reassure your team that they know their duties and that they still have tasks ahead. Focusing on the task at hand helps people get past the panic and worry about the unknown future.

What should one expect from new leadership?

As a new leader, your top priority is to manage this leadership change by utilizing applicable change management strategies. Your role is helping the team cross the divide, gaining your team's trust and making sure the transition is as smooth as possible.

CONCLUSION

Leadership is a marathon of continuous development, both personal and professional.

I believe the most important areas of leadership development are:

- Strategy development and deployment
- Negotiation skills
- Change management
- Conflict management
- Collaboration
- Team work
- Communication skills
- Interpersonal skills

Leaders should assess their leadership skills against these areas. Accordingly, a development plan should be put in place to cover any deficiency.

From an endeavor to another, as the context changes, leaders find themselves in need to evaluate their areas of strength and improvement. A strength in one endeavor might be an area of improvement elsewhere.

Lifelong learning is the sincere companion to modern leaders.