Through my young career, I have had the amazing opportunity to work for exceptional leaders, project managers (PM), as well as PMs in a leadership capacity. Jointly, there have been instances with the above positions where experiences were soured as a result of failed performance.

In my past position, I worked in refugee resettlement and my supervisor was responsible for the global operations for the organizations. On multiple occasions, I had other companies offer me positions, often making more than 75% of what I was being paid. The main reason why I remained in my position was my supervisor was an amazing leader. In his previous role in the banking industry as an executive, he led over 200 individuals and managed the underlying responsibility.

During our first one on one meeting, he truly inspired me through the following experience. This is how the first conversation went (Verbatim) “Hi Dan, it’s nice to meet you, I’ve heard you have been doing some great work around here. I am hoping that in our first meeting you can help me better understand where I can help the projects you are currently working on, where you might need resources that I can help you get, and finally share with me areas where I should stay out of your way (Richard Payne).” I was truly blown away from this first interaction, and walking away from that meeting I felt that my boss was for me. He most exemplified servant/transformational leadership theory. Richard understood my driver personality, how to motivate me beyond the position, and inspire me to grow as one of his subordinates. He took the time before the meeting to research my work and understand how best to motivate me. In the long run, this set him up for success because through his demonstration of servant leadership I became inspired to perform, win for the department, and make him look good. Our team was very effective under Richard’s leadership because he led by example and his leadership style acquiesced very well with everyone on the team.

As I take on more leadership roles, I strive to put into action the three main points Richard asked me. Tell me about your work, how can I help, how can I stay out of the way? As I work with people, this communicates that the leader cares, seeks to positively transform the individual, and recognize the need to stay out of certain projects (this build trust). These are rather simple concepts, but I greatly desire to put them into practice as I move forward in leadership.

While in my refugee resettlement role, I observed another leaders interaction. In many instances, this leader failed to enforce a model work ethic through little time in the office or MBWA. Furthermore, he failed to inspire his team as well as convey that he cared about their work. On a personal level, this individual was very friendly, smart, and easy to converse with. As a leader, his failure to inspire, convey genuine interest, and demonstrate work ethic resulted in two of his subordinates quitting as well as his administrative assistant.

The takeaways from the above situation are simple yet profound. Leaders need to demonstrate they are hard workers, simply put. I saw firsthand how morale is linked to the demonstration of a work ethic. Second, taking genuine interest in someone’s work goes beyond asking the question, “what are you working on?” One needs to act engaged and seek to further another’s work. Third, inspiration is not easily executed. It takes intention, apt delivery, and sincerity. I don’t doubt that the failed leader sincerely wanted his subordinates to succeed, but he failed to inspire his team.

As I develop my leadership skills, I will hone in on demonstrating a solid perception of work ethic, inspiration, and sincerity. These attributes are not easily executed, but I have a deep passion to develop.

Alaska is a beautiful state, and I had the opportunity to work as a project manager on construction project. The primary client was an Athabascan Chief, and we were building a Retreat Center on his land. Mid-way through the project funding was greatly reduced due to the Great Recession. The Sr. Project Manager (SPM) had known for months that the project was ill funded but failed to communicate the change until two weeks before major construction was to start on the main facility. This created ill-will and a feeling of distrust between the clients and our construction teams. Work massively slowed, relationships were unnecessarily strained, and productivity suffered. The major failings were the lack of communication and failure to manage expectations. Setbacks are inevitable, but the SPM gravely misunderstood the clients need for continual communication about finances and not just the project’s wins. I have learned from this scenario to manage key relationships with great intent, and no news if often bad news. Part of managing a relationship is being candid, I understand it is important to win over clients, but honesty with tactfulness sustains a relationship. As a result of the SPM lack of communication and management, the entire team had great difficulty implementing the rest of the project.

Chapter 15 of Project Management discusses international projects and culture. When I was in Afghanistan, I had the opportunity to experience my Project Manager navigate Afghan politics exceptionally well. He would meet with provincial governors, mayors, and heads of state but purposely kept at arms distance. Corruption was rampant by USAID standards and he maintained social acumen without getting caught up in the politics. He maintained a position of honoring those in authority without being called upon for “favors”. Our team learned the value of managing relationships from a safe distance. As a result of the PMs shrewd cultural navigation, out team had top talent and remained focused on the task at hand as opposed to loosing focus and energy on matters not relevant to our project. I have applied this to my working relationships in that when managing projects I purposely avoid conversations and places where I might lose focus.

One of my major first projects in refugee resettlement was to host a huge dinner for Somali dignitaries, government officials, and local refugees. My manager was the acting senior project manager (SPM) and one of the key honored guests. When the night of the big dinner was in full swing, we had a huge turnout. As the event progressed, my SPM jumped in the front lines of the evening by taking out trash cans, serving food to the refugees, and cleaning up mild spills. I was taken back by and inspired by his hands-on approach, there was no task too low that he would not take on. Walking away from that project, the team and I learned that if our SPM would serve a project in the capacity he demonstrated that night, we too would have to emulate that same attitude and behavior. The bar was raised after that night, and the team grew in maturity from the sense that we all new that the buck stopped with us and we were inspired to take on any task to fruition for the sake of a successful project. Since that night, in my new company and role if we are entering a meeting and someone is setting up I will jump in and assist in the setup. I do whatever it takes to assist in completion of remedial tasks despite who is or isn’t looking. The overall theme I have applied is despite years of work and titles, there is no role that a project manager should participate in that is too low.

My project manager in Afghanistan did a great navigating the political landscape of Afghanistan, but he had trouble leading the local Afghans on our team. Issac was Ugandan, and in his culture they value direct communication and being blunt. Afghanistan is more of an Asian culture in that shame is never directly imposed on individuals. The danger in applying shame came have very negative consequences. Issac on multiple occasions would castigate locals Afghans and other team members in front of other Afghans and team members. This resulted in massive amounts of shame being imposed on individuals. As a result of his cultural insensitivity, one of our team members threatened to blow up our compound and he was fired. In addition, the Afghan nationals would avoid and lie to Isaac because of his confrontational management style. There was a great deal of dysfunction and our team failed to bond. I have learned that when correcting and reprimanding individuals to do it in private (most situations), and have an attitude of restoration not confrontation. This has helped me to preserve relationships while still being candid.

Highlight the best and the worst experiences (one each) you have had firsthand, or observed from a distance, of each: 1. PMs, 2. Leaders and 3. PMs as leaders. Suggest what enabled the examples of exemplary performance and then alternative ways you would have handled the worst experiences differently. How does all this effect team effectiveness?

Convince me that you have the understanding (through experience or otherwise) to create, develop, maintain and lead a high performance team.