Leading and Motivating Peer Teams

Lisa Martin

Managing a project team with critical outcomes and strong personalities is a complex task. It's also one that librarians end up doing frequently: leading teams of peers on critical, short- or medium-term projects without necessarily having training or support in leading teams. So, with the stakes high and experience low, how do you avoid blundering into error?

Ideas listed here are inspired by the *Harvard Business Review* article "Are you sure you're not a bad boss?" as well as a Daniel Goleman article in the *New York Times* on emotional intelligence and library-specific articles such as Steven Bell's Good Leaders Learn What Not to Do and Jennifer Bartlett's The Power Deep in Org Chart: Leading from the Middle. This list, though, is a library-focused take on how to lead peers when you are not in a formal managerial role.

Ten Errors to Avoid when Working with Peer Teams as the Project Leader

1) Failing to empower your team

If your team doesn't get the opportunity to help direct the project, they won't be as committed to the outcome. At the same time, decisions sometimes have to be made in a hurry. Empowering the team can be a tricky balance between doing it all yourself and setting unreasonable project deadlines.

Request team input as much as possible. Work with the project team to determine a preferred mechanism for communicating (email, in person, through a project website, smoke signals in the sky…whatever communication strategy or strategies work best). Don't be afraid to use a different strategy when the deadline is short but do try to establish routines which are thoughtful of the more reflective thinkers as well as the more spontaneous ones.

Librarians typically have a collaborative spirit so it can be hard to picture yourself leaving your colleagues on the team out of the loop. It often happens by accident and isn't intended maliciously but making all the decisions yourself (or even with the advice of your supervisor and other administrators) is a critical error. Empowering your team to make decisions together leads to productive results.

2) Avoiding the Hard Questions

Sometimes, you know there's a problem. Other times, you're caught completely by surprise. Either way, it can be very easy to want to smooth things over rather than tackle the problem.   Ask the hard questions necessary to actually resolve, as best you can, the problem that your team has brought to you.

Getting your team to feel comfortable with bringing up their concerns about the project is an accomplishment. It may not feel like it when you're dealing with those concerns but it is a success to have those concerns brought to you and not left to seethe under the surface. So respect your team and ask them what's wrong and listen to what they say. If the problem is you, respect their willingness to say so. If the problem is something that neither your team nor you can control, advocate for your team and make the best of the situation that you've ended up in.

Work with your supervisors and other stakeholders to look for answers. Ask the team, too, for solutions to the concerns that they bring up. The old teaching adage 'if one person

raises their hand to ask the question, five other people are grateful that someone asked the same question they had' applies to concerns as well. Very often this means that you will have a team who can provide solutions to a concern that you may not have even known that they had. The hard questions are critical to producing an end product that lives up to what the rest of the library expects.

3)   Communicating changes once—and never again

There's an old marketing saw that says for a brand to stick in a customer's head, the slogan needs to be repeated at least seven times. This idea, more broadly known as effective frequency, is somewhat controversial. There is, however, value in the idea that repetition helps a person comprehend the message. If you tell your team about a change, be prepared to tell them more than once. Give the reflective thinkers as much time as you can, the impulsive thinkers the chance to move past their first impressions, and everyone the opportunity to emotionally process the change.

Even better, work with your team to shape the changes. Teams which play a role in shaping their project are more committed to responding positively to the changes forcing that re-shaping. Be prepared to provide multiple venues (email but also in person or on the project site) for people to see the changes and engage with them.

One way to relieve team fears that they will be ignored in the change process is to communicate those changes often to everyone. Another way is to work with everyone to produce the changes as a team. Change is also connected to the aftermath of asking the hard questions and to moving past a failure so be sure to keep those errors firmly in mind. Repetition, time, and input are the keys with change communication.

4)   Doing it all yourself

"If you want it done right, do it yourself." It can be an easy trap to fall into, especially when unreasonable deadlines are at play. But doing it all yourself is not sustainable over the long run and you risk burnout not only of yourself but also of your team. If the team doesn't make any of the decisions or participate in any of the work, then you won't have buy-in and tasks won't get done. If you made an arbitrary decision in a stress-filled moment, get team buy-in and perspective. You'll end up with a stronger project and a happier team.

If your project team is toxic and you feel like it's a case of do it yourself or it doesn't get done, take a step back. Reconsider the nature of the team, who the members are, and how you work together. A change in any one of those areas (especially "who") can have a big impact on the rest of the project. Figuring out how to engage a toxic team member and channel their passion into a productive result for the project is a great learning experience, but not one worth alienating the rest of your project team.

Don't be afraid to make bold changes mid-stream or even late in the game. You may presume that your supervisor or other administrators will not allow you to remove someone from the team, but have you actually made the case to them? You are the advocate for your team and it's your job to figure out how to accomplish the team's task--but it's not your job to do the task. There's a reason your administrators put together a team for this project.

5)   Staying in the silo

The importance of communicating about your project to stakeholders, let alone outsiders, can sometimes be forgotten in the midst of the push to actually get the work of the project done. Supervisors need to be informed, the project milestones need to make their way

up to administration (following the golden rule of thumb: no administrator likes to be caught by surprise), and collaborators both inside and outside the library should be kept in the loop.

Regular check-ins with key stakeholders help keep your team accountable and everyone informed. Plan as a team to determine what you want to highlight, what challenges to bring to stakeholders, and what your next steps are. This allows you to keep the team mindful of the final goal while also keeping them involved.

External communication is also key. Important contacts need to know what the project team is doing for many reasons, including communication of the value and relevance of the library. Communicating the actions and ideas of the team to superiors, stakeholders, and external groups allows everyone outside the team to be aware of how the project is doing.

6)   Setting unreasonable deadlines

When working in peer teams, especially on ad hoc projects that may come without clear goals or reporting lines, it can be easy to end up with a deadline from above that your team needs to get done in an unreasonable amount of time. Leaders who come 'from the side' to lead other peers (rather than from a formal managerial role) may not have the experience to know how to shield their teams from these difficult expectations.

A major skill to have sharp is managing up so that your supervisors have an active understanding of the team's goals but aren't impeding progress. When presented with impossible deadlines, it is necessary to keep your team's goals in mind--and push back when warranted. If the moment is handled skillfully, your team will be grateful and so will your supervisors when they see better results coming out of an extended deadline.

On the other hand, if you're the person setting unreasonable deadlines for your team, reconsider. They have other projects on their plate and you will only be able to convince them that it's an "emergency" once. Reasonable deadlines are therefore crucial.

7)   Ignoring (or being overwhelmed by) your own role

Project leaders have to put in a great deal of work before, during, and after the work that their team puts in. The mental balancing of agendas and priorities and needs can be significant—and is on top of the actual work of the team. There are times when this juggling act (especially when it comes without a reduction in general workload) falls apart. But without someone taking the reins, the project can't move forward.

The project leader needs to schedule in the time necessary to prepare for a meeting, to organize the agenda and priorities of the team, to regroup when hard questions are raised, to determine the deliverables and final content of the team. All of which means that the team leader who fails to leave sufficient time and energy for these tasks is letting their team down.

If you are overwhelmed by the amount of work required to lead your project team, sit down and figure out how to reduce your load. Work with your supervisor to make sure that your schedule is manageable. Leading a project team requires a significant investment of your time and energy and both of these are finite; prepare wisely so that you can expend them without burning out.

8)   Wasting time on a failure (instead of moving on)

Whether it's acknowledging that one project team member is never going to put in as much effort as the rest or accepting that there's a once promising idea that now needs to be put out to pasture, at some point you will have to cut your losses.

As librarians, this can be a particularly difficult mistake for us to avoid. We continue to support events that receive three attendees and to champion technologies long past their sell-by

date and to retain that computer book from 1985. So recognizing that an idea or program is a failure and, harder yet, recognizing that your team needs to stop doing something can be quite complicated.

Having assessable data and metrics which provide guidance to how success should be defined are helpful here. Making the case to end something nearly always involves making someone unhappy. Data can take emotions out of the equation and allow the team to make a reasoned and sincere recommendation to move forward without a failed project or service or idea. Moving past failure can be difficult but it is essential for the overall success of the project.

9)   Passing up the chance to have fun

When you walk into a meeting of people that you've worked with before, you sit down and start to catch up. This social time at the beginning of a meeting can be a positive force but it can also delay the meeting and cause conflict for more action-oriented team members. One solution is to develop a team or library-wide expectation which incorporates that early socializing time into the meeting and plans around it. This sense of play and collegiality starts the meeting on a good note.

There is an important balance between maintaining that sense of fun and wasting an entire meeting gossiping. It can be especially difficult when leading peers to know where to draw the line. Some team leaders draw the line too harshly and think that their team should spend the entirety of a meeting working. The team needs to celebrate and socialize just as much as it needs to accomplish the tasks set forth in the project charge.

Not every library has an organizational culture that places a premium on fun and not every project is the appropriate venue to be light-hearted (grievance committees come to mind here). Virtually every team, though, benefits from a hint of fun at some point during their project. Our work is important but rarely is it so important that a light-hearted moment can't be acknowledged.

10)   Forgetting to plan for what comes next

Your project has an end date, far away as it seems in the beginning, and it's wise to have a strong idea throughout the project what the final product will be. Depending on the structure of the project and how it was presented to you, your team may have a lot of leeway in presenting the end product or very little. Questions about the end are essential to answer at the beginning but also as things change.

How is your team going to assess success (or failure) of the project? Has the landscape of your library changed such that your project needs to pivot in another direction? What do the deliverables look like for the end of the project? How will the project sustain itself after your team completes its work? These questions are easier to answer by the end than the beginning, but the project will run smoother with a consideration of the end goal throughout the project.

You may not know a Gantt chart from a gnat, but keeping the team on track to completing the goal on time requires constant planning. It's well worth doing some research on basic project management techniques and asking for advice from other experienced project leaders. Deadlines slip--if you've ever had a contractor work on your home then you know this well!--so it can be critical to re-evaluate the direction of the project at key points. Keep the vision of the end product vivid for the team throughout the project.

So there you have it: ten mistakes to avoid when leading project teams in libraries. May your projects run smoothly, on time, and with great success.

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Lisa Martin (lmmarti5@central.uh.edu) is Assistant Librarian at the University of Houston Libraries