Effective Leadership: Best from a Distance?

To the Editor:

In “To Learn Team-Building, Ask The Dirty Dozen” (May-June 2004, pp. 64, 62-63), author Bob Lewis did not bring up that in most teams there are always good and bad members. A team leader should be able to realize the latent strength of the team and to bring out the very best from each member. Trust is the key element—team members can always trust a great leader because he can turn a bad team into a reputable one.

Lewis also pointed out that “The appointed leader must maintain some distance, because that’s part of what’s needed to maintain authority.” Of course, the authority can be maintained by distance, but is that an effective way to lead? Is that a convincing authority? The leader wants members to not only follow his or her orders, but also wants to win their hearts. After all, being a team leader does not make one the boss. It is rather about helping teammates work on their skills, inspiring them, and supporting them.

The leader also tries to understand different individuals’ team roles, strengths, and characteristics, encouraging the whole team to act like a family. As a result, the leader commits to his or her team members and makes them feel they are important, they are valued, and that, ultimately, the goal of the team is very important. That way, the cooperation that the team leader obtains is neither by control nor authority, nor purely by bonuses, but by comprehension.

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Bob Lewis responds:
Without question, there’s more to leadership than fostering effective team dynamics. In fact, there are seven more tasks effective leaders have to take care of: envisioning the future, delegation, decision making, staffing, motivation, establishing culture, and communication. These, in fact, are the subjects of the remaining chapters of my book, Leading IT: The Toughest Job in the World, from which this article was excerpted. All eight of these tasks are interconnected.

I still maintain that the most effective leaders don’t become part of the teams they lead. Experience tells me that interacting as a peer—a team member—is incompatible with the exertion of authority and, even more important, with the ability to deliver necessary but unpopular messages. Put differently, it’s difficult to lead from the middle.

Another point: Every team might start out with “good” and “bad” members. Effective leaders probably spend more time and energy on staffing than on any other single responsibility. Much of that time and attention is as Li describes. However, effective leaders don’t allow bad staff members—those who don’t perform well and over time demonstrate that they don’t have the ability or drive to become strong performers—to drag down the rest of the team.

So I don’t accept that every team has good and bad members. Strong teams with strong leaders have plenty of time and patience for members who are still learning and have the motivation to do so—but they have none for those who can’t or won’t do their part.

Correction
The article “Software in the New Millennium: A Virtual Roundtable” (Thomas C. Jepsen and colleagues, IT Professional, July-August 2004, pp. 10-17) should have listed a company affiliation for coauthor Dan Ferrante. He is a software R&D engineer for Borland.