

Leading Peers

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Motivating People Effectively, Without Authority

By the Mind Tools Content Team



The only difference between you and your colleagues is that you're in charge.

"Peer: one that is of equal standing with another." How comfortable or effective would you be at leading your equals, your peer group?

Before you answer, here's what such a job might look like:

You'll be managing a diverse group of people from a variety of departments. They each have different areas of expertise and different ways of getting work done. The people don't report to you, and you'll have little or no authority to direct their performance. However, you'll be held accountable for the team's output. To accomplish the team's goals, you'll be expected, among other things, to motivate, facilitate, encourage, communicate effectively, build trust, and resolve conflict.

This doesn't sound like a lot of fun, does it? But when leading a team of your peers, these are typical challenges.

Leadership is a complex subject. However, the one thing that traditional leaders can usually rely on – regardless of their style or situation – is [legitimate power](#). When things get tough, a traditional leader has the status and position to demand how work is done.

But when you're in charge of a team of your peers, your level of authority is often nonexistent. You might have as little status as the person to whom the work has been given. Here are the key skills you'll need to succeed as the leader of a multifunctional peer group.

Manage Peer Group Dynamics

Learn to lead discussions and proactively manage different personalities. You never know what past experiences – good and bad – that team members will have had with one another.

Whatever the history, your role as leader starts with setting a positive foundation for the team's interactions. So:

- Establish a relaxed environment, where everyone is encouraged to share opinions and ideas.
- Ask for input from everyone, and encourage quieter members to speak up.
- Use [active listening](#) skills, like paraphrasing and asking questions for clarification.

- Insist on respect for one another and, for tasks taking a lot of time and effort, consider developing a [team charter](#) to define your team's goals and how the team will work.
- Use participative decision making tools, and try to ensure active involvement and commitment from the team.

Tip:

This article is about **not** being the boss yet being held responsible. For more on how to handle the change in relationship dynamics when you manage your "former" peers, see our article [Now You're the Boss](#).

Empower Your Peers

Leaders who give power to others can be very influential and motivating. When leaders use their power to help others accomplish great things, people often want to work very hard for them.

When you empower someone, you're essentially saying that you trust that person. When people feel trusted, they may naturally want to take on more responsibility for the outcome, because they'll share in the spotlight when success is achieved.

Empowerment, then, is a great motivator, and it can be used to recognize the efforts of team members. When leading your peers, be creative with reward and recognition – sometimes assigning a task or granting a level of authority can serve as a very effective reward.

Beyond this, work hard to [motivate](#) the people you're working with and, in particular, give [praise](#) wherever it's due.

Model Flexibility for Your Peers

Rules, regulations and a heavy-handed approach can cause resentment and non-compliance in a team of peers. Use discretion, and learn to adapt to the changing environment – this can be critical.

You won't always be the expert, and you won't always know what to do. With a flexible leadership style, you can often deal with changing circumstances without compromising your leadership role. If you rely on a rigid structure and style, you may find yourself challenged often, and you may waste your energy fighting interpersonal battles instead of accomplishing goals.

Essentially, you need to help your team adjust to changes in direction, circumstance, and priority. Whenever you get a cross-section of people working together, there can be times of ambiguity and uncertainty. When you're open to change, your team will see that, and they'll be more likely to accept change as well.

Focus Your Peers on Their Goals

Few teams would get very far without goals. Certainly you need goals to point you in the right direction and to evaluate performance. When you bring together a diverse set of people, having a clear direction is even more essential.

All team members will likely have their own perspectives. These could lead your team down very different paths – if there's no central direction to follow. Different paths can also cause conflict around resources and priorities.

You can avoid many of these difficulties with clear [goal setting](#), based on agreed and valuable objectives. It's much easier to keep people working together effectively if objectives are clear, if it's obvious how the team's output will help its customer, and if disputes are resolved by referring to the team's goals.

From then on, it's important that you develop an implementation plan and remain focused on your targets.

Tip:

One key to success here is mindset, making the most of the situation you find yourself in rather than feeling it's a problem landed on you. For further guidance on leading your peers, see our articles on [Career Progression in Flat Organizations](#), [Job Crafting](#), [Initiative](#), and [Holacracy](#).

Support and Protect Your Peers

Each team member usually has his or her own regular job to do in addition to the team's specific tasks. This means that commitment to your team may be weakened from many directions.

As the leader, and the one who is ultimately accountable, concentrate on getting the support and resources your team needs to do the job well.

Focus on these three key areas:

1. **Obtain resources** – Your team may quickly lose momentum if it encounters resource shortages. If you get your team what it needs – when the team needs it – your status, influence, and ability to motivate can increase significantly.
2. [Manage stakeholders](#) – Many people outside your team may strongly influence the team's success. First, you may encounter outside resistance from various sources. For example, John's manager may not allow him to work more than one hour each week on team projects, or the finance director may refuse to "spend one more dollar on that project." There may also be key team champions. As a leader, your challenge is to figure out how to use the

champions' influence to persuade "resisters" to change their opinions. A great way to gain the respect of your team is to protect it from negative outside influences, so that team members can produce great work.

3. **Obtain management feedback** – Your team needs to know they're supported. Make sure you receive regular communication from managers and executives. You're the liaison – the link – to ensure that management knows what's going on, and that your team knows what management thinks. This can be a delicate balancing act, because you don't want to run back and forth with too much information. Figure out what each side needs to know to remain satisfied, and then provide it.

Key Points

Leading a team of your peers, colleagues of an of equal standing with you, is a definite challenge, and it can put all of your leadership skills to the test. From setting goals to involving team members in decision making to creating a climate of openness and honesty, you need to have it all. And more.

If you remember to put your team's needs first, and if you work very hard to protect their interests, you'll prove to them that you're committed to and passionate about their success.

When you demonstrate that you believe in the value of their work, and when you're willing to work through any obstacles you encounter, your team will respect your integrity. And they'll want to work hard with you, and for you, to achieve results.