

Are You a Boss or a Coach for Your Project Team? And is it time to switch things up: How to effectively lead modern projects

August 6, 2024



In the world of project management, the roles we assume can significantly impact the outcome of our projects. Two primary approaches often emerge: the boss and the coach. Both styles have their merits, and knowing when to embody each can drive successful project delivery. But what exactly distinguishes these roles, and how can we effectively balance them?

Understanding the Nuances: Boss vs. Coach

The Boss: Autocratic Leader Approach

A boss, in the traditional sense, exercises control and authority over the team. This approach is characterized by a clear hierarchy, where decisions are made at the top and communicated down the chain of command. The boss sets expectations, monitors performance closely, and often takes corrective actions to ensure targets are met.

Characteristics of a Boss:

1. **Decisive and Directive:** Makes quick decisions and provides clear instructions.
2. **Control-Oriented:** Focuses on maintaining control over processes and outcomes.
3. **Performance-Focused:** Prioritizes meeting deadlines and achieving specific results.

4. Accountability-Enforcing: Holds team members accountable for their responsibilities.

The Coach: Collaborative Leader Approach

A coach, on the other hand, emphasizes collaboration, development, and empowerment. This approach involves guiding the team, fostering a supportive environment, and encouraging personal and professional growth. The coach acts as a mentor, helping team members to develop their skills and solve problems independently.

Characteristics of a Coach:

1. Supportive and Empathetic: Provides encouragement and understanding.
2. Development-Focused: Invests in the growth and development of team members.
3. Collaborative: Values input and feedback from the team.
4. Empowering: Encourages autonomy and self-management within the team.

Understanding the Impact of Each Approach on Teams, Individuals, and Your Project Results

Team Dynamics:

- Boss: Teams led by a boss may exhibit high efficiency and discipline, particularly in structured environments. However, this can sometimes stifle creativity and lead to lower morale if team members feel micromanaged.
- Coach: Teams guided by a coach often demonstrate higher engagement, creativity, and job satisfaction. The collaborative environment can lead to innovative solutions but may require more time for decision-making.

Individual Development:

- Boss: Individuals under a boss may develop strong task-specific skills and a clear understanding of their roles. However, they might feel restricted in their personal growth and professional development.
- Coach: Individuals working with a coach are likely to experience significant personal and professional growth. They often feel valued and empowered, which can enhance their overall job performance and satisfaction.

Project Results:

- Boss: Projects led by a boss can achieve quick and predictable results, especially in crisis situations requiring decisive action. However, the approach may not be sustainable in the long run if it leads to burnout or disengagement.

– Coach: Projects under a coach might progress more slowly initially but often result in more sustainable and innovative outcomes. The team's increased engagement and ownership can lead to higher quality and more resilient solutions.

When to Employ Each Approach: My 7 Tips for effective leadership

Balancing between being a boss and a coach is crucial for effective project management. Here are seven tips to help you decide when to employ either approach:

1. **Assess the Situation:** In high-pressure, time-sensitive situations, adopt a boss-like approach to provide clear direction and maintain control. In contrast, use a coaching style during planning phases or when innovation is needed.
2. **Understand Your Team:** Recognize the strengths, weaknesses, and preferences of your team members. Some individuals thrive under clear directives, while others excel with more autonomy and support.
3. **Evaluate Project Phases:** Different project phases may require different leadership styles. Initiation and execution phases might benefit from a boss approach, while planning and closing phases could be better suited for coaching.
4. **Consider Team Experience:** Novice teams might need more direction and oversight (boss), whereas experienced teams often prefer guidance and empowerment (coach).
5. **Gauge Team Morale:** If team morale is low, shift to a coaching style to rebuild trust and engagement. Conversely, if the team is highly motivated but unfocused, a boss approach can provide the necessary direction.
6. **Foster Development:** Use coaching to develop future leaders within your team. This approach helps build a more resilient and capable team over time.
7. **Balance Authority and Empathy:** Strive for a balance where you provide clear direction and accountability (boss) while also showing support and empathy (coach). This balance can help you maintain control without stifling creativity and growth.

Being a boss or a coach isn't about choosing one approach over the other; it's about knowing when to embody each role to drive your project to success. By understanding the nuances of both styles and their impact on your team and project outcomes, you can navigate the complexities of project management more effectively.

Embrace the flexibility to switch between being a boss and a coach as the situation demands, and you'll foster a more dynamic, resilient, and successful project team.



Nicola Benjamin