

**Everything Worth Knowing about Project Management
I Learned Coaching Youth Soccer
James R. (Jim) De Piante, PMP
Executive Project Manager, IBM Corporation**

Abstract

In soccer, success is defined as a win. Teams win consistently when the coach is a good leader. In project management, success is defined as full scope, delivered on time, and on budget. Projects succeed when the project manager is a good leader.

Knowledge of basic soccer techniques and the “Laws of the Game” is essential for the soccer coach, but does not ensure success. Similarly, knowledge of basic project management techniques and the “PMBok” is essential for the project manager, but does not ensure project success. The distinguishing characteristic of both the successful coach and the successful project manager is the ability to lead.

Many analogies can be drawn and many leadership lessons can be learned from studying the dynamics of a youth soccer team. Understanding these lessons and their applicability on a project team can help ensure success for the project manager.

Introduction

Most IT projects fail. (The CHAOS Reports, 1994 - 2004)

If we define success as full scope, delivered on time and on budget, then we must concede that most IT projects fail. But why is that? Project management techniques are certainly well defined, and presumably well understood, by the Project Management Professional.

In sports, it is clearly understood that the coach is ultimately responsible for the success or failure of the team. The coach has (or should have) everything at his or her disposal to succeed. When the team does not succeed, when the team does not win consistently, there has been a failure in leadership, and we all naturally expect that the owners will fire the coach. It is leadership ability that distinguishes the most successful coaches.

Ultimately, the success or failure of a project is the responsibility of the project manager. The project manager needs to be willing to accept complete responsibility for the success or failure of the project team, and this implies not only the mere ability to do the things that the PMBoK says to do, but to truly lead the project team. It is leadership ability that distinguishes the most successful project managers.

There are many analogies to be drawn and many leadership lessons to be learned from the world of sports. In particular, recreational youth sports provides a great many leadership lessons that can help the project manager ensure success on projects.

Indispensable Leadership Lessons from Youth Soccer

Picking the Team

One of the things that characterizes *recreational* youth soccer as distinct from other forms is that, in a recreational (*rec*) league, any child who signs up gets put on a team and must be given a certain amount of playing time. The team you get is the team you get. You don’t only get to pick the best players. In some leagues, you may not get to do any of the picking at all. Rather, the team is assigned to you by the league. (The only player you can be certain of getting is your own child!) And you certainly don’t get to fire any players during the course of the season.

The project manager might often hear advice that goes something like, “If you want to be successful on your projects, get the best performers on your project team.” Well, I suppose that would be great were it possible. On the other hand, the best performers typically are in great demand, and (especially in IT), it is often difficult to fully staff the team with anyone at all, much less the best performers.

The challenge for the rec soccer coach, as for the project manager, is not to get the best players, but rather to get the best from every player. The coach or the project manager must be committed to cultivating the talent that is available to him or her, valuing every player, and ensuring that they become “best players”.

Exploiting First Impressions

Once you are assigned your team, you will want to meet them, and the sooner the better. What you do at that first meeting says a lot about your expectations of others, and what they should expect of you. It’s your first and most important opportunity to lead by example, and implicitly establish expectations for many things, including courtesy, punctuality and the effective management of meetings and communications.

Playing the Part

In your every interaction with your team, but especially so in those first interactions, you want to give your team confidence in you as the leader. Your experience and training ensure that you have the necessarily technical skills. Your team wants and needs you to also have the leadership skills that will ensure their success. You need to look and act the part. Your team’s confidence in your ability will help you to help them succeed so you want to cultivate this confidence as a necessary ingredient in your success. As you succeed, you will gain greater confidence in your own ability and your team will have greater confidence in you – ensuring continued success. Success breeds success.

Establishing Values

Part of the “up-front” work that the coach and the project manager are responsible for is in defining the team’s values. Much of this is done implicitly, through example, especially in the early going. But it also helps to be explicit about expectations on the team for such matters as punctuality, courtesy, decision making, escalations, commitment, meeting conduct and protocols etc.

This is all particularly important on a cross-cultural team, where expectations might be very different and not at all well understood. Similarly, on the virtual team, expectations might be quite varied, and so it is helpful to be explicit rather than making assumptions.

Deciding Who Plays Where

Utility Players

Some players are highly specialized. Others are more generalists. It’s the role of the coach and the project manager to ensure that the whole team is optimized. This may mean that some players are not in their ideal position, but they are where they do the most good for the team. We have to be careful to remember who these players are, especially when it comes to recognition and reviews.

Temperament

We tend to think of our players as “resources” and to talk in terms of general skills, losing sight of the individuality and temperament of each person. We would do well to understand, however, that most players are not going to play well in more than one position. People are not plug compatible, and moving them from one position to another can be very detrimental to the individual’s performance, and even more so to team performance.

Unsung Heroes

Every team has its unsung heroes. In soccer, typically, it's the defenders. It's important for them, and for everyone on the team, to understand that there are two equally important components of the score – goals for, and goals against. It also helps to encourage the more visible “stars” to recognize the contribution of the equally important but less visible players. On the soccer field, this can be accomplished, for example, by asking the person who scored the goal to give recognition to the person who passed them the ball.

Getting Inside their Minds

The Power of the Halftime Speech

We all recognize the power and usefulness of the “halftime speech”. It is a way, at a critical juncture in the game, to galvanize attention and to motivate – to tap into the deep wellspring of individual and team potential. It can help to cast the alternatives (success and failure) very starkly, and remind the team of their ability to influence the outcome. It's also a good idea to make the goals tangible and real. Keep the message simple and stay on message.

Remember too that there is only one halftime per game, and thus the possibility of only one halftime speech per game. It is not a technique we want to overuse.

Praise

A sure way for a coach to earn the contempt of a young player is to praise him unjustifiably. Yes, we want to be appreciative, but we must be sincere, and we don't want to overdo it. Conversely, we must always keep in mind that we never want to take anyone's contribution for granted. We especially want to remember this in the case of the really strong players, the so-called stars.

Criticism

When there are only a few minutes remaining in the game, everyone's tired, and your team is behind, and someone on your team makes a mistake, that is the wrong time to do a “lessons learned”, or critique the other person's play. Everyone on the team needs to be focused on the win, and not on placing blame, or defending themselves from someone who is placing blame. Nothing is more destructive of teamwork than criticism. When players start blaming team mates, teamwork is destroyed, and so is any chance for a win.

A good leader will never participate in criticizing and blaming. Furthermore, a good leader will not tolerate it from others. There are enough things working against you. Destructive criticism needs to be stopped in its tracks.

Certainly, a team, and individual players must examine their work and frankly assess problems, shortcomings and opportunities for improvement. But this is something entirely different from placing blame. It is the leader's responsibility to create a climate on the team where mistakes are permitted as a means to improve.

Failure

We must never let teammates blame the outcome of a game on the failure of an individual player. In a sense, all individual failures on a team are team failures. One can hardly blame only the keeper for letting a shot go in. The ball should never have been that far back. Where were the defenders? The midfielders? Why were we not even in possession of the ball? Why did we not have a bigger lead? What broke down and why? What skills haven't we taught? What's wrong with our practices? What can we do differently to ensure it never happens again?

The Mood of the Team

The astute coach will observe that the mood of the team is greatly and profoundly influenced by the mood of the coach. The mood we bring to the game will affect the mood of the entire team, and could adversely affect the outcome of the game. We need to be mature enough to realize that we need to be “up” no matter how we feel.

Encouragement and Confidence

We have to have confidence in our teams. When the going gets rough, we can't become negative or begin to doubt. We can't be foolishly optimistic either, but we need to trust that our people can do what they are trained to do, and what they are skilled at doing. We can't let them doubt themselves, and we can't doubt them. To paraphrase Henry Ford: Whether we believe they can, or they can't, we will be right.

Getting Help

Assistant Coaches

A good coach knows to cherish a good assistant. The best assistants share your values, but will often otherwise be very different from you. They will see things you don't see. They will notice things you don't notice. They will understand things in a different way. They will be able to handle situations that you can't handle. They will be able to fill in for you and make good decisions based on shared values. They will tell you what you need to hear, and not always and only what you want to hear.

But good assistants aren't easy to come by. You must find them. You must cultivate them. You must listen to them. You must mentor them. You must encourage them. And you mustn't be surprised when someday, they leave you. It is your job to prepare them and yourself for them to do that. And then you must begin again.

Players as Leaders

Some of the players on your team will distinguish themselves as leaders. As coaches and as project managers, part of our job is to recognize and cultivate the leadership abilities in our players. There's a whole different world out on the field during the game that you, as coach, have no visibility to. You can't be everywhere. If you have done a good job establishing team values, strategy, tactics and goals in these leaders, they will lead your team where you would want the team to go.

Seeking Advice

Assistant coaches and players have much good advice to give. Make it easy for them to give it. Ask them for their input. Make sure that they understand that they are giving you advice, but that you are making the decision. If all goes well, then clearly, you must acknowledge their contribution to the decision. If all does not go well, then clearly, you must accept responsibility for the bad decision. Ask for advice, weigh it in the balance, then make your decision. But make it **your** decision.

Creating the Team's Culture

Gimmicks

There are a lot of little things you can do to create a sense of belonging and to create a team culture. In a sense, these things are artificial, and not really organic. But the short duration of projects makes it necessary to hasten the process a little. In any case, artificial or not, these mechanisms can and do work. Some examples:

- Team shirts, hats or similar items
- Theme songs that could be played on conference calls
- Slogans, mottos, expressions that the team uses
- Sharing family photos, recipes etc. on an electronic version of the old-fashioned bulletin board

The Big Bang

Why wait until the season, or the project, is over before having a team get-together or social event? It's especially helpful for the virtual project team to have a face-to-face get-together early on the project. The accountants will frown on it, but you must insist. There's no way you can do a business case for such an expenditure. The cost is very

concentrated, and very easy to quantify. The benefits are more dilute, and very difficult, if not impossible, to quantify. You have to have real conviction of the value of such a get-together. If you are not convinced, you will be unable to convince anyone else either.

Commitment

There are a great many things that can be done to create a sense of belonging on a team. This sense of belonging creates in turn a sense of commitment – to each other, and to team goals. In such a climate, a great many things will happen that might not otherwise happen that will help accomplish team goals. Teamwork and collaboration increase, and people are more eager to make personal sacrifices for the common good.

Managing Communication, Risk and Change

Communication

One of the most important skills a youth soccer coach can teach the players is game-time communication. A brief word or two in a game (e.g., “I’m alone.”, or “Man on!”) can completely change the outcome of the play and the game. One of the most important skills a coach can have is the ability to communicate succinctly and unambiguously.

Communication is the lifeblood of any team. Each member of the body must know what the other members are thinking and doing. Communication must be pertinent, unambiguous, timely and accurate. Measures must be taken to facilitate such communication.

Risk

Things can and do go wrong. Some of these things can be anticipated. Others can’t. In soccer, sometimes the ball literally just doesn’t “bounce your way”. For those things which you can anticipate, specific plans can be put in place to address them. For the many things which can’t be anticipated, steps can still be taken to soften the blow. A deep bench mitigates a great many risks. But the best mitigation of risk in a soccer game is a 3 goal lead at half time.

Clarity of Objectives

In soccer, the objective is twofold, and utterly unambiguous. First, your team is to kick the ball into the opponent’s goal. Second, your team is to prevent the opponent from doing likewise. This kind of clarity allows the two teams to focus intensely on accomplishing those objectives, and to orient their every action toward succeeding in accomplishing the broader goal. The success of every action is immediately and very clearly understood and judged according to how much and how well it contributes to the larger objective of the game.

Such clarity is certainly equally valuable on the project team, and it is a primary responsibility of the project manager to ensure it.

Unambiguous Status

Similarly, it is very easy to understand status in a soccer game. Essentially, it comes down to knowing, quite literally, the score. There are other secondary factors, for example, how much time remains in the game, who may have been given a yellow card, who is injured and similar such things. And these things can amplify the coach’s and the team’s understanding. But to know the score – two numbers – is to know a great deal. It is also true that the score is known instantaneously, unambiguously, by all stakeholders. This is good advice for any project manager. Ensure that status is reported in simple terms, that it is unambiguous, that it is reported as soon as it is known, and that it is known accurately by all stakeholders.

Change and Version Control

A soccer team can gain a competitive advantage by changing what it's doing and catching the opponent off balance. But you don't want to also catch your own team off balance. It's crucial to let all those who need to know, what's going on. It's also important to stay with your game plan until it becomes clear that you have to change it. Don't churn it. It's also a good idea, time allowing, to assess the need for and the impact of the change with assistants and players. On the other hand, sometimes the coach, and sometimes even the players must act unilaterally, quickly and decisively.

Conclusion

Leading Versus Doing

A project manager must be knowledgeable and skilled in three areas:

1. Project management.
2. The project domain.
3. Leadership.

A person can be a great (winning) coach or a great (highly successful) project manager without being highly skilled in the domain. If a great athlete becomes a great coach, it is because of leadership ability, not because of athleticism. Likewise, a great project manager, a great leader, can manage projects in a variety of domains. Domain knowledge is less important than project management skill, and much less important than leadership skill.

We should remember on our projects that we are there to lead, not to do. There are those among us who often gravitate toward doing technical work on our projects. Your leadership skills are much more valuable to the team than your ability to do technical work. Leave the technical work to your team. Lead.

Accepting the Challenge

The single most important lesson in project management to be learned from coaching youth soccer is this:

In soccer, success is defined as a win. Teams win consistently when the coach is a good leader. In project management, success is defined as full scope, delivered on time, and on budget. Projects succeed when the project manager is a good leader.

Leadership is about people – about real flesh and blood. Your project teams want and need leaders.

- They want leaders who will accept responsibility.
- They want leaders whom they can respect.
- They want leaders who have integrity.
- They want leaders who will lead, and lead by example.

As a project manager, you have accepted that burden. If you want your team to win, then you have to lead.

References

The CHAOS Reports. The Standish group, which studies reasons for IT project failure, has published its CHAOS report annually since 1994. In the process, they have studied some 40,000 IT projects and have analyzed reasons for and the trends in project success and failure. While there has been steady improvement in project success rates, it remains true (as reported in the 2005 edition of the CHAOS report) that the majority of IT projects fail.