Leadership

A white paper from 3Back, LLC

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Every Team deserves a Perfect Team Captain, but most are anything but…

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Believe it or not, when I was a kid we used to play outside. In particular, in the fall we used to play 7-man touch football on the vacant lot down the block. We had a few Teams in the neighborhood that played against each other regularly. My Team's captain was my best friend, Matt. He was a great athlete that we loved, admired, trusted, and respected. During the games, he called the plays for our Team, and when we practiced he taught us new plays and coached us on how to run them. In our eyes, he was a Perfect Team Captain (PTC).

Now, every manager or leader I know *wants* to be a Perfect Team Captain; and every organization I know *wants* to have Perfect Team Captains in all their leadership and management positions.

So why are so many of them Bad Bosses? In particular, why do so many of them become overbearing, micromanaging autocrats? What's going on here? How does this happen? How can we prevent it? How can we fix it?

This is what I will discuss in this white paper.

I want this discussion to be simple, straightforward, and understandable, so I'm going to focus on Teams and their Team Captains. I believe this is an appropriate view to take because big organizations can be viewed as Teams of Teams, and the smallest organizations consist of a single Team. So, a single Team and its relationship with its Team Captain is something we really need to understand.

Teams and Team Captains

So that we are all on the same page about what I'm discussing here, we need some definitions. Here are the basic definitions (of 'Team' and 'Team Captain') that I will use in this paper:

Team: a (relatively small) group of people that works together to achieve their goals.

Team Captain (TC): the member of the Team who represents the Team to external Stakeholders, and is accountable to them for the Team's performance and results.
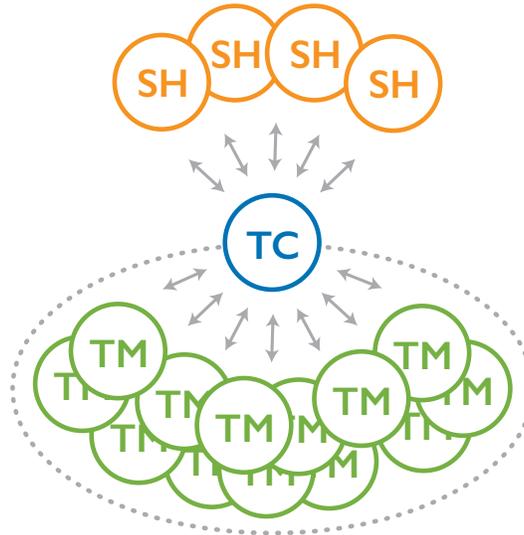

Figure 1: The Team's Captain Represents the Team

On a small Team like this, each Team Member should be able to talk to, and work with, any other Team Member. The people on a Team may have different skills and knowledge – and be differentiated in that way – but there are no walls between people inside the Team.

Even so, the Team may arrange itself into sub-Teams as they do their work. For example, an American football Team (on offense) consists of linemen, receivers, running backs, and the quarterback; but they are all planning and working together – with the quarterback as their Captain. In software, a Development Team may consist of analysts, coders, and testers; but they are all working together to produce working software – with the Team Leader as their Captain.

Being a Team's Captain is a relationship the organization recognizes – the Team Captain is acknowledged to represent the Team to the organization. On the other hand, being a *Perfect* Team Captain is a relationship the *Team* recognizes – it means their Team Captain also has the *right* relationship with the Team – one of *proper* Leadership.

The Perfect Team Captain

As noted above, the Team Captain is accountable to the organization for the Team's performance and results. In particular, this means that the Team Captain is accountable for the decisions that the Team makes about what to do, and how to do it. In order for the Team Captain to be a Perfect Team Captain, the TC needs the *right* leadership relationship with the Team.

When put into traditional management-speak, this means:

- The TC *is* the Team's **Director**; accountable for defining the Team's Missions and Objectives; making decisions about *What* should be done, and *Why*.

- The TC *is* the Team's **Manager**; accountable for supervising the Team and making decisions about execution – decisions about the *Who* and *How*.

- The TC *could* be the Team's **Leader**; the Team Members are following the TC for the 'right' reasons, which involve words like *inspire, trust, respect,* and *admire*.

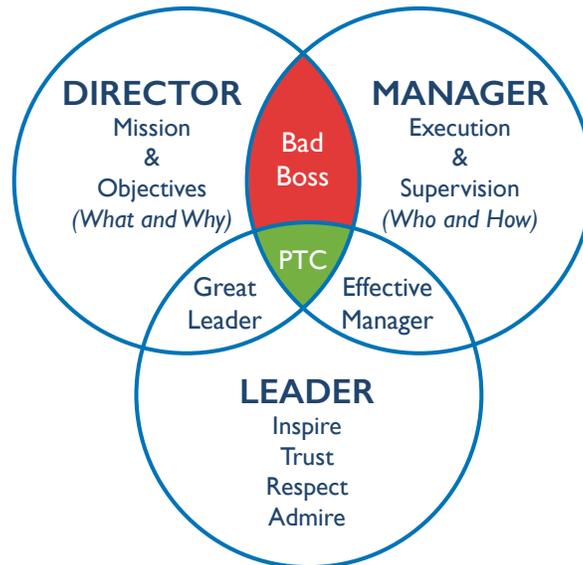The following diagram (Figure 2) shows the relationship between these three responsibilities.

Figure 2: The Team Captain's Triad of Responsibilities

Looking at this diagram clearly shows where the danger lies; that trying to both Manage and Direct, without exhibiting 'real' Leadership, can easily lead to becoming a Bad Boss. The most common Bad Boss is a micromanaging autocrat, which is a Boss who tells the Team what to do, and how to do it, without significant feedback from, or discussions with, the Team. This often leads to Team Members becoming disaffected, disappointed, and upset – which leads to them doing less than they are capable of.

Unfortunately, in my experience, I have noticed that most of these Bad Bosses *believe* that they are Perfect Team Captains. After all, they *are* getting things done, and their people **are** following their instructions – they are Leaders, by gum! They can't see that they are leading through authority, coercion, and fear; they can't see that they aren't 'real' Leaders.

To understand how to become, or create, a Perfect Team Captain, we need to understand the interplay between decision-making and Leadership. The goal is to help you understand how to help a typical Team Captain become a Perfect Team Captain.

Decision-Making Styles

People have studied and analyzed decision-making styles for centuries, especially when it comes to military or political leaders. In this white paper, we are *not* worried about military or political leaders; we *are* worried about individual Team Captains. However, much of this research is relevant to us. In 1939, Lewin, Lippitt, and White[1] divided decision-making styles into three categories:

- **Autocratic:** The Team Captain is being 'bossy,' and makes the decision without getting the Team's advice.

- **Participatory:** The Team Captain includes one or more Team Members in the decision-making process, but the TC maintains the final decision-making authority. This is often referred to as being more 'democratic.'

- **Delegative:** The Team makes the decision in a 'self-organized' way; however, the Team Captain is accountable for the decision that is made.

In 1973, Tannenbaum and Schmidt[2] further refined these categories into a continuum of seven styles which balance the involvement of the Team Captain and the Team. These styles are shown in Figure 3 (with the shading indicating the degree of involvement) and is further defined below.
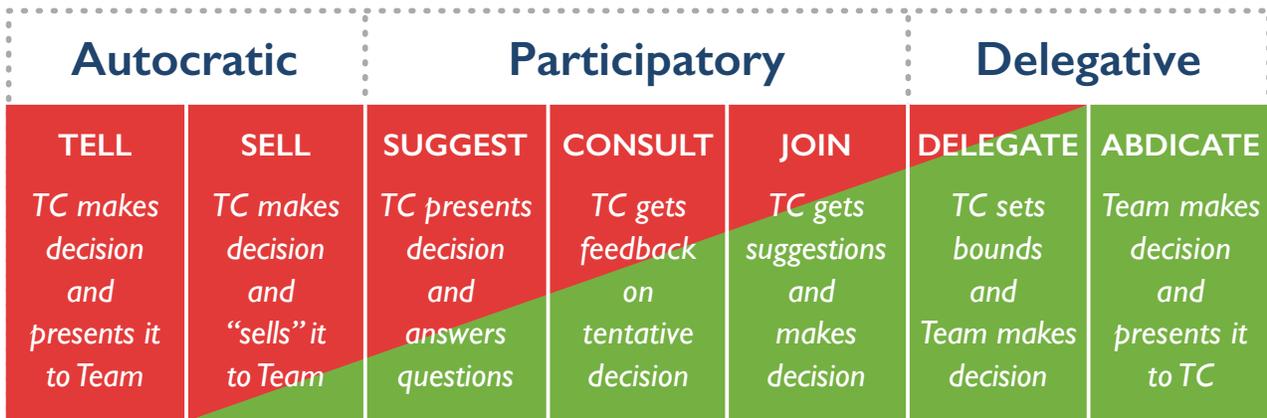
Autocratic		Participatory			Delegative	
TELL	**SELL**	**SUGGEST**	**CONSULT**	**JOIN**	**DELEGATE**	**ABDICATE**
TC makes decision and presents it to Team	*TC makes decision and "sells" it to Team*	*TC presents decision and answers questions*	*TC gets feedback on tentative decision*	*TC gets suggestions and makes decision*	*TC sets bounds and Team makes decision*	*Team makes decision and presents it to TC*

Figure 3: The Tannenbaum-Schmidt Decision-Making Continuum

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[1] Lewin, K., Lippitt, R., White, R.K. (1939). Patterns of aggressive behavior in experimentally created "social climates". *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 10, 271-301.

[2] Tannenbaum, R., Schmidt, W. (1958) "How to choose a leadership pattern" Harvard Business Review 36(2), 95-101.

Autocratic Styles

- **TELL:** The Team Captain makes the decision and simply announces it; there was no Team involvement in the decision-making.

- **SELL:** The Team Captain makes the decision without involving the Team, and then "Sells" his decision to the Team; the Team Captain explains to the Team why it was the right decision, but does not accept questions or feedback.

Participative Styles

- **SUGGEST:** The Team Captain makes the decision without the Team's involvement, presents it to the Team, and answers the Team's questions about the decision. This allows the Team to gain a better understanding of how the decision was made, what the Team Captain is trying to accomplish, and what options the Team Captain considered.

- **CONSULT:** The Team Captain makes and suggests a tentative decision to the Team and invites a discussion regarding the decision. The Team discusses the tentative decision with the Team Captain, and the decision can change based on this discussion.

- **JOIN:** The Team Captain presents the problem or situation to the Team, has a discussion with the Team to get suggested solutions, and then makes the decision; the Team comes up with suggestions, and the Team Captain decides based on those suggestions.

Delegative Styles

- **DELEGATE:** The Team Captain presents the problem or situation to the Team, puts limits on the Team's solution, and asks the Team to decide on the solution.

- **ABDICATE:** The Team Captain presents the problem or situation to the Team, and asks the Team to decide the solution. The Team Captain may participate in the discussions, but must take his or her 'Team Captain hat' off and exert no undue influence on the Team.

Use Different Styles for Different Decisions

Generally speaking, the Team Captain is accountable for answers to two different questions: *"What should the Team do?"* and *"How should the Team do it?"* In Figure 2 these are represented by the Team Captain playing the 'Director' role (What and Why), and playing the 'Manager' role (How and Who). In other words, the Team Captain needs decisions about *"What?"* and decisions about *"How?"*

But not all 'Whats' are equal, and not all 'Hows' are, either. Each decision is different, and each decision should use a decision-making style which is appropriate for it. These styles range from an Autocratic Team Captain making decisions without input from the Team (at one extreme), to a self-organized Team making the decisions without influence from the Team Captain (at the other extreme). Some of the factors to consider when determining how to make a decision include the type of decision ('what' vs. 'how'), the urgency of the decision, the maturity of the Team, Team culture, who has the knowledge needed (Team Captain vs. Team), and so on.

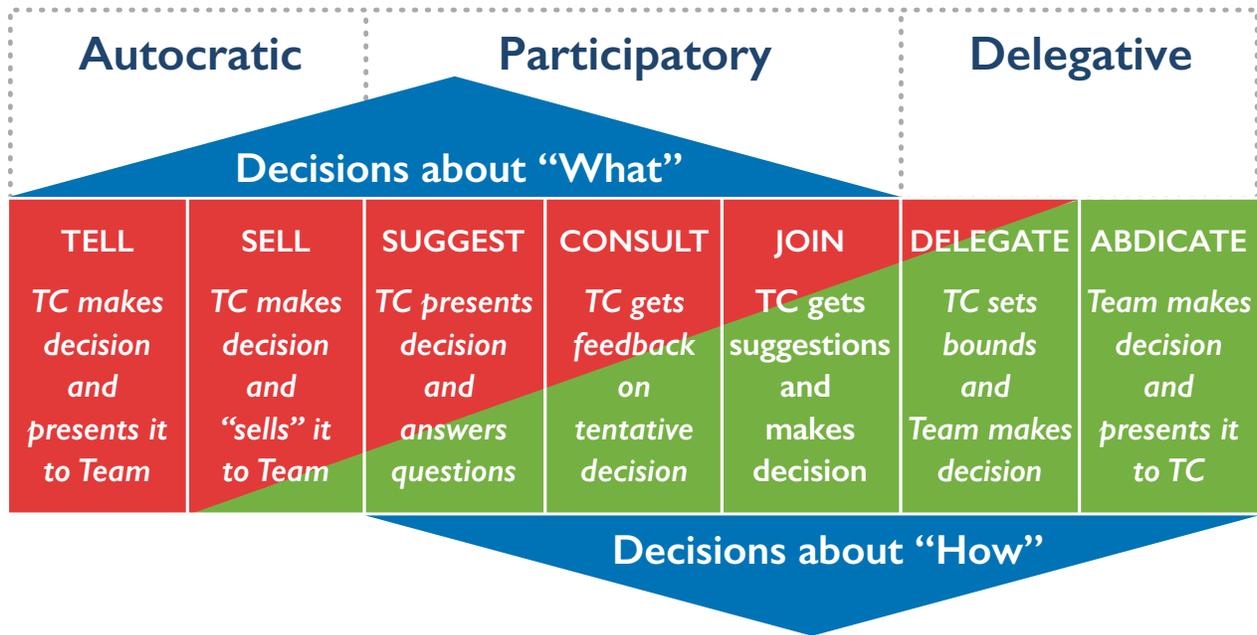Figure 4 illustrates these different decision-making styles.

Autocratic		Participatory			Delegative	
Decisions about "What"						
TELL	**SELL**	**SUGGEST**	**CONSULT**	**JOIN**	**DELEGATE**	**ABDICATE**
TC makes decision and presents it to Team	*TC makes decision and "sells" it to Team*	*TC presents decision and answers questions*	*TC gets feedback on tentative decision*	*TC gets suggestions and makes decision*	*TC sets bounds and Team makes decision*	*Team makes decision and presents it to TC*
Decisions about "How"						

Figure 4: Decision-Making Styles for 'Whats' and 'Hows'

As you can see, there are two 'humps' in Figure 4, indicating different ranges of decision-making styles for decisions about 'Whats' and 'Hows.' This shows what we expect for mature Teams with a Perfect Team Captain, and results from the mutual trust and respect the Team and Team Captain have for each other.

Most decisions will be participatory, resulting from discussions between the Team Captain and the rest of the Team; the discussions about 'Whats' will often be led by the Team Captain, while discussions about 'Hows' will be led by the Team. The style used for each decision is based on the decision, and we expect the whole Team will develop Norms about this as it matures.

Emergent Leadership

Of course, the Team Captain is not the only leader on the Team. The Team Captain has *formal* leadership, as it is recognized by the organization, but there is *informal* leadership, as well. The most common kind of informal leadership is Emergent Leadership, which is when other Team Members (besides the Team Captain) take the lead temporarily. In the above discussion, when I say that the discussion is being 'led by the Team,' it usually means a leader has emerged to lead the discussion.

Emergent Leadership arises on an as-needed basis when it becomes clear that somebody besides the Team Captain should be 'running the show' right now – and is usually done because somebody has specialized knowledge or skills that are required. Leaders usually emerge in one of two ways:

- The Emergent Leader steps up and takes over: *"This is my area. Let me lead for a bit…"*

- The Emergent Leader is called out: *"Hey, George, you know this stuff. You lead…"*

As a Team matures, it develops Team Norms about Leadership. It learns the answers to: *"Who should step up and lead in this situation?"… "or that situation?"…* and so on.

Developing a Perfect Team Captain through Decision-Making

All Team Captains want to be Perfect Team Captains, but most fail. So what can you do, if you are a Team Captain, to become Perfect? Well, you, the Team Captain, are automatically the Director and Manager of your Team, so you only need to get a 'real' Leadership relationship in place. In other words, all you need to do is to get your Team to trust and respect you.

A piece of cake, right?

Not so much, but let's take a look at using decision-making styles to help. If a Team Captain uses appropriate decision-making styles with his or her Team, it can help the Team Captain gain the Team's trust and respect, which makes the Team Captain a 'real' Leader.

What should the Team Captain do to make this happen? First, the Team Captain must realize that Participative decision-making provides a built-in feeling-out process; the Team is learning to know the Team Captain, and the Team Captain is learning to know the Team. This is a good start.

So, start off by making all decisions in a Participatory way; make sure there is a good, even if short, conversation involved in *every* decision, if possible. We want to get both sides to value the other side's input. At the beginning:

- The whole Team (Team with its Captain) should make the 'What' decisions using either the "**SUGGEST**" style (if the decision is already written in stone) or the "**CONSULT**" style (if it isn't). In the latter case, the Team Captain must be prepared to migrate to the "**JOIN**" style if the questioning raises issues that need to be discussed. The Team Captain's goal is to show strength and resolve while simultaneously demonstrating respect for the Team.

- The whole Team should make the 'How' decisions using the "**JOIN**" style. The Team Captain's goal is to demonstrate that the solution belongs to the Team, but the Team Captain still owns the decision – that the Team Captain is taking ownership and accountability, and won't be throwing the Team *under the bus* if things go sideways.

If decision-making styles start here, in the 'middle' of the continuum of decision-making styles (see Figure 4), and then adapt as the Team and Team Captain become more familiar with each other, this optimizes the chances of the Team learning to trust and respect the Team Captain. From the Team's perspective, decision-making being appropriately shared between the Team Captain and the Team leads to:

- *increased rapport* (we understand each other and communicate well),

- *increased trust* (the Team Captain is proving to be in it for the Team), and

- *increased respect* (the Team Captain makes good decisions about what we should do).

Not only that, but this shared decision-making allows the Team Captain to learn to trust and respect the Team. In combination, these attitude changes lead to a reinforcing spiral in which the Team and Team Captain trust and respect each other more and more as time goes on. This is one of the traits of 'real' Leadership; it builds on itself through time. It is tricky, though; it is easy to make mistakes and screw things up.

Here are a couple of things to look out for:

- The Team Captain should always feel free to ask the Team for more help. But the Team may be fearful of providing help if it's *not safe* to do so. The Team Captain must refrain from blaming the Team if something goes wrong; the Team Captain must never throw the Team *under the bus*. No matter what, the Team Captain retains accountability for the decisions and the results that follow from those decisions.

- Sometimes the conversations involved in participatory decision-making indicate that the decision is *really hard* to make. It is tempting to *cut through* the BS and just make an Autocratic decision, but it is probably more appropriate to deconstruct the decision into smaller decisions and continue being Participative.

I think that's enough advice…

As you can tell, there's nothing easy about becoming a 'real' Leader. It is hard work – but it's possible. In particular, a Team Captain who uses appropriate decision-making styles can often gain the trust and respect of his or her Team and become a 'real' Leader.

Summary

Every Team Captain (person in a position of authority) wants to be a Perfect Team Captain, which is a combination of a Director, a Team Captain, and a 'real' Leader. Directing and Managing are skills you can learn, but being a 'real' Team Leader is a relationship that you *earn*.

Team Captains are accountable for decisions, and using appropriate decision-making styles allows a Team Captain to build a relationship of trust, respect, and rapport with his or her Team. This relationship is the essence of being a 'real' Leader, and thus allows the Team Captain to become a Perfect Team Captain.

Good Luck!

Primary References

1. Dan Rawsthorne and Doug Shimp, Exploring Scrum: the Fundamentals, 2nd Ed., 2013, http://www.amazon.com/dp/1461160286

2. Stephen Bungay, The Art of Action, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, Boston, 2011.

About the Authors

Dan Rawsthorne has developed software in an agile way since 1983. He has worked in many different domains, from e-commerce to military avionics. He has a PhD in Mathematics (number theory), is a retired Army Officer, and a Professional Bowler and Coach. Dan is very active in the Agile/Scrum community and speaks quite often at conferences and seminars. He is a transformation agent, coaching organizations to become more successful through agility. His non-software background has helped him immeasurably in his coaching: his formal training in mathematics guides him to look for underlying problems rather than focus on surface symptoms; his military background helps him understand the importance of Teamwork and empowerment; and his work with bowlers has helped him understand that coaching is a two-way street.

Doug Shimp has worked in the technology field since 1992 and has played many key roles on software Teams, including Coder, Tester, Analyst, Team Leader, Team Captain, Coach, and Consultant. Doug's passion is for Team learning to improve product development, and he is a leader in the area of agile/Scrum transitions and applied practices. He believes that the core basis for applied agility is that 'You must see the result for it to be real; otherwise it is all just theory...' Much of his experience with Teamwork and agility comes from outside the software field, including an earlier career as an owner/Team Captain of a painting company – which enabled him to learn about small-Team dynamics in a very hands-on way.