More Patterns for Group Leadership

Ofra Homsky
42 Bitzaron, Tel Aviv
Israel
tngt@netvision.net.il

Group Leadership patterns focus on the unique role the leader of a group has in steering her/his group through successes and hardships. They emphasize the place of the leader in affecting the behavior of the group, focusing on the function a leader should take to help the group to better manage some of the changes that come from within the group itself, created by the social interaction among group members.

The following are more patterns of what I hope to build into a full pattern language, and join those I presented in last year's EuroPLoP [5].

We all accept for granted the alchemy that creates a group out of a collection of individuals. A group, being comprised of individual people, takes on an additional identity, a collective identity – that of the group: a software team, a task force, a tour group, or a class.

People who had a positive group experience may sometimes feel the success happened 'of it own', through no direct action of the group leader or participants. People who were part of a negative group experience often find it hard to identify points of failure in their group work.

There are many factors that influence the general mood in the group and it's work, external factors and internal factors. Some of then are unexpected but some can be predicted and prepared for.
A group leader cannot relay solely on the chance participation of highly motivated people in the group, and the chance that these people will also be very experienced in working as a group towards achieving goals.
Even with such salutary conditions, social and group dynamics require monitoring and intervention at certain points, and the group leader is in the best position to do that.
Leaders are the ones who have an overview of the group: its assignments, tasks, abilities, composition, performance and goals. Consequently, the group leaders can influence, facilitate and streamline the group conduct and disposition.

The target users of these patterns are group leaders: teachers, guides, managers, instructors, and coaches. Not every person filling these positions possesses natural leadership qualities. There are however some 'tricks of the trade' that can be learned and used consciously and purposefully, according to circumstances.
A group leader should first have some training of their role and had acquired a certain level of professionalism including people skills, group dynamics and theories, motivation and coaching. These patterns assume that a person acting as group leader has had such training, and they add a few more insights into the role and possibilities a group leader can have in conducting her or his group.

Group Leadership patterns should combine with other patterns and pattern languages referring to group work, in the sense that together with the preparations of and for the program, group leaders should bring into consideration these "mood change" factors and integrate these suggested patterns into their program.

During the initial phases of the teamwork there are two main issues to resolve: setting what is to be achieved and how it is to be achieved [1].
The **Unity of Purpose** pattern [2] helps team members create a shared vision of **what** is expected of their team.

People also want to find out **how** these goals are to be achieved, which norms and behaviors are expected of them.

There are two levels that define these - one is the stated level, facilitated by **Set the Pegs** pattern. Depending on the team and leadership styles, either setting or arriving at an agreement of how it should be done in the early stages the team works together.

But stating and declaring is not enough, which is why it is important to get to the level of doing. How you as a leader behave is setting an example for the team members.

Throughout the entire life cycle of the team, there are times when events do not occur as planned. The team's progress towards achieving it goals is stuttering or halted. The obstacles seem impassable. Team moral turns low.

The problem might be a bug that halts down everyone, disrupting work and making everyone work hard at isolating it. It might be a field day where the team was to cook out together, and someone forgot to bring the food ingredients or drinks…

Once the source of the problem is found, it is very human for the team to focus the anger and aggravation on a person who is associated with the problem or delay.

While this behavior is very human, it also acts against the continued cohesion of the group – in some cases, the mistakes made might be made by anyone, at anytime. People learn how making mistakes is handled, and may adopt defensive behaviors (such as the military and bureaucratic CYA – Cover Your Ass) that are counter-productive to achieving the team goals. This is where the **Compass** and **Protect the Victim** patterns come in handy. **Protect the Victim** suggests shifting the focus from blaming to preventing, curing rather than symptomatic treatment. **Compass** concentrates on the responsibility of the leader and the need for the leader to be the sentinel always checking if events disrupt group work and countering such deviations to restore the **Unity of Purpose** [9].

There are times that group members will not express themselves as openly as described in **Compass** or **Protect the Victim**. Not all people express disagreement or difference of opinions with the leader, the group behavior or members conduct, and it is important to manage these feelings. The group leader has to pay attention to the **Body Speak** in order to notice body language that reflects disagreement, avoidance or discomfort. All these can give a sensitive and experienced leader clues that there are issues that are bothering group members but are not dealt with.

Some of the pressures or considerations that occupy group members' attention arrive from outside of the group. **Field Day** pattern offers ways to compensate and reduce pressures pressing from outside considerations group member deal with.

And the last pattern, **Grand Finale**, relates to the end of the group work. People need to pay special attention to an end of a period in their life, and in a group they need ways to handle the end of the group, the project they gave time and effort to.

To illustrate the patterns throughout the pattern language I use metaphors taken from marine life, as I find that appropriate to a discussion of leadership. [3]

Thanks

Set the Pegs

A ship without a rudder will crash on a lee shore.

Context

Your group is new, only starting its work together. You wish it to adopt certain guiding principles, norms and character that will guide all actions throughout the program.

Alternatively, the group is embarking on a new type of activity, facing a first conflict or gets new team members. This new activity requires the group to reorganize or reorient itself. This might be the starting of a testing phase following the coding phase, reorganizing for field trial of a product, or an interest group that ran for election in the student union, won, and now needs to reorient itself towards performing tasks and services for the entire student body.

The typical atmosphere in such beginnings is a mixture of goodwill, hopes, aspirations and ritual sniffing [1]. Most team members expect the team leader to provide structure, make expectations clear, orient the team towards the goals and the means to accomplish them, defuse doubt, help in forming sub-teams, facilitate getting acquainted even for the introverts in the team and help in establishing the team's contract. [4]

Problem

During your first encounters with the group you are aware that what you do at the beginning tends to have effect for a long time.
Team members are looking for clues into what are the norms the group is to follow.
Presenting the team members with a book of rules, procedures and regulations usually has little to no effect in most organizations, even in autocratic or military style cultures.
Yet, you wish to set basic values and the framework that will guide the group's conduct, and help new team members find out in an orderly way what are the expected norms of behavior and performance.

Forces

- People tend to want to assimilate into a new framework and assume its rules and conduct.
- Group leaders and members tend to assume the desirable atmosphere will create of its own accord.
- Lacking rules and norms, people will tend to fight or flight, according to their individual behavior patterns when disoriented.
- Though unpleasant to set rules and easier to let things flow, group leader needs to lead the shaping of the group and project as the ethic rules and team goals will provide reference for decisions and reorientation in times of doubt and under pressure.

Solution

Use all first time events and first times an issue is raised to present the expected norms of behavior or preferred attitude you wish to set for the future.
Use the agreeable spirit of a beginning to set the pegs for your group conduct and values.
What you do at the beginning tends to have effect for a long time. Against the surrounding euphoria of a new start, at the beginning of your group's life the group expects the leader to shape the culture and ethos for the group to work with throughout its existence. (Personal example is a very strong motivator).
Do it now because what is set now, stand fewer chances for re-defining later – team members will form norms on their own, and changing those norms later will require a lot more energy and cause a lot more aggravation.
Present minimal rules that will support this vision and be strict about them, but react if change is needed. At this stage people won't grudge the strictness much, and you can instill the preferred behavior and group culture that will prevail into the group life.

Precautions

You will still need to perform maintenance and re-evaluation of the norms throughout the group life.
Plan in advance so that the rules you establish align with the ultimate goal and the character of your program.
Do not set a rule you will not be able to support, maintain and enforce.
Beware of overdoing – do not attempt to set a huge set or requirements, regulations and norms in a single opening session.

Known Uses

- In guiding courses and experienced tour-guides teach new guides a "trick of the trade": If you want your group to keep to the schedule, be very strict about time on the first day of the program. For example, start all and every activity set in the itinerary on the dot. If you allow time spill on the first day - your group will always be late for the duration of the program. This advice proved itself throughout my guiding years and any group I witnessed time and again.
- In Transformative Mediation the first meeting between the mediators and the sides of the mediation is considered critical for setting up and projecting the rules of behavior, norms and values that will work throughout the mediation process. Indeed the mediators are encouraged to consider every aspect and nuance of this first meeting so everything happening during it will convey the message and rules they wish to set for the duration of the mediation process.

Resulting context

By setting the conduct of the group members through action instead of cognitive explanations you ease your group towards favorable norms of behavior without offending their sensitivities. In most teams, people learn the decision making process on the first time a decision is made. The style used for resolving conflicting opinions has significant impact on how people will voice their opinions or avoid from voicing them.

Compass

Without compass a ship wanders into strange waters

Context

The leader is the one charged with the responsibility of keeping the group focused. At times, group members may get lost in the details and the everyday problems or get sidetracked by event(s). Not always the person in the role of a leader has leadership qualities.

Problem

A ship without a compass wanders into strange waters.
At different points along the program the group allows impact of event(s) to divert it from course. Group members may drop into quarrels; allow despair, problems or difficulties to distract or even cease their work, wasting time and energy on procrastinations.

Forces

- Group leader may also get swept with routine and daily problems, and is also affected by events.
- Hardships tend to make people short tempered.
- People tend to look for a reason, or someone to blame for what bothers them.
- Group behavior can escalate sporadic anger into aggressive behavior towards one person.
- The leader's people skills, perceptiveness and experience affect detection of the problem.

Solution

When a group drops into unproductive quarrels, a drop into a circle of despair, desolation and justifications, re-channel the group thinking and acting towards achieving it goals through teamwork. Once you notice ineffective behavior, refocus the group members on immediate tasks and activities to improve or correct the problem. Literally step in and stop the unwanted behavior, describe the ineffectiveness of their actions and remind them of the character of the group as you were building it.
The group leader, by having the wider view is able to see the full picture instead of the details and has the responsibility to re-focus the group, be the compass that keeps it on it's course.

Precautions

Be aware that at any time the group can let even a single event plunge it into this vicious circle.

Known Uses

* Joseph Bergin tells he was a member of a group of students, at the end of a successful program taking young people on sailing boat as a program for self-image promotion. It was the last day of the sail, and the guy in charge of navigating missed the entrance to the harbor and they all had to work hard, tired as they were, to get back and into docking. The group members were upset with that on-duty person and the situation very quickly deteriorated to black mood threatening to obscure all the achievements of the program. Only an intervention of one of the students saying he was glad to be spending this extra time together. He reminded the group members they were at the end of a successful program; that they were a united group and as such should work together as a whole to help get the ship back and into the harbor. A leader should not have left this vacuum for a chance team member to act.

Resulting context

By re-channeling the group towards more productive ways to solve a crisis you keep the group cohesion and prevent it from wasting time and energy procrastinating instead of working towards achieving the goals.

Protect the Victim

The crew has thrown a noose over the yardarm

Context

In a group there's assignment division. A failure or a mistake by one of the member for any reason may delay, disrupt or disorder the whole group's progress. The group tends to blame the individual.

Problem

One of the group members made a mistake that has influence on the entire project. The other group members get upset at the individual. Anyone may make a mistake, but making one should not deteriorate team spirit, and group behavior can escalate sporadic anger into aggressive behavior towards one person.

Forces

- The group wastes energies instead of harnessing them toward finding solution.
- Personal quarrels result in lower group and individual moral and that causes lower productivity.
- Aggressive group reaction to mistakes may cause timid members not to take risks thus might miss on good ideas in the future
- Blaming may allow discharging of responsibility to other aspects of the work that still needs to be done.

Solution

Intervene when you notice the group attacking a person (or persons) for a mistake or misjudgment, even if that person is "guilty". Make the problem into a group project to solve.
Set the group to work on solving the problem together instead of offending each other; maybe have a meeting focusing on finding a solution as a group to the problem, making sure to avoid accusations and other wasteful behavior. Remind group members of the preferred values and conduct of the group culture.
Estimate the need to also remind all group members of context, goals, encourage energy and finally redirect them towards finding a solution with the group helping in.

Precautions

It is advisable to also allow venting of frustration – as described in the pattern **Safety Valves** [5]**.**

Known Uses

* Without the intervention in Joe Bergin's experience of the sailing boat program for self-image promotion (**Compass**), the group would have ended the program with a feeling of failure and disgruntlement, leaving the guy who made the mistake to carry the burden of the group's distress.
* Once a bug is discovered in a new product, the project manager will set a group of programmers to try to locate the error and a group of programmers to find a solution. A smart project manager will also keep the group from troubling the one who made the error turning this into a learning experience and channeling the energies toward solving the problem.

Resulting context

By refocusing the group on solving the problem instead of blaming and arguing you utilize their abilities and energies better, prevent damage to the social cohesion, and even increase it. Mobilizing everyone in the group into solving a glitch will involve all of them in the achievement.

It may be wise to set time for checking the incident itself in order to avoid similar mistakes in the future and to allow clearing of bad feelings between group members. You may consider using Safety Valves pattern for this purpose.

Body Speaks

Crew is sullen. Captain suspects mutiny.

Context

Some of the messages people give are not said in plain words.
Knowing how to read body language is a useful communication skill.[6]

Problem

Group members may have needs that should be met, or have important information that the group leader should be aware of. However, group members may be reluctant or too shy to openly express problems, present issues or preferences that bother them. They may think that criticism is disrespectful, or show lack of manners.

Forces

- Some of the messages people give are not said in plain words.
- Group member's shyness may prevent them from bringing up problems such as not understanding an issue, disagreement with the speaker or simply tiredness.
- Though group members may be reluctant to express concerns, conflicts or problems, these may contain very important information, either indication to group dynamics, program problems, and practical issues.
- The leader's people skills, perceptiveness and experience affect detection of the problem and reaction to it.
- Body language is a valuable non-verbal gauge of a person internal state.

Solution

Look for non-verbal clues for disagreement or discomfort in group members' behavior:
Perhaps the class occupy itself with something while you speak; Perhaps you notice the students sinking in their seats as the lesson progresses; Frequency of people leaving the room; Perhaps there are conversations going on when a task or idea is being presented; Perhaps group members avoid eye contact with you when you ask for opinions. Bending away and other gross postural shifts often reveal negative feelings [7]
Respond accordingly: either change activity, make a break even if it is not scheduled yet, or even stop whatever it is you're doing altogether and inquire of the group as to what may be disturbing them. The change may solve or help mitigate some of the problem, and opening a conversation may lead to a process (however short of long) of dealing with a problematic issue.

Precautions

Circumstances have strong influence on both behavior and interpretation of body language.
Do not get too sensitive and intimidated by your group's responses.

Known Uses

- When presenting an idea or procedure, many group leaders can gauge the level of enthusiasm of their group members by the sound level and facial expressions.
- Amir Raveh says when he teaches he takes a visual evaluation of "people heads height" at the beginning of class. Then when he sees this average dropping, (meaning, people sink into their seats) he makes a break even if one is not scheduled just yet. The time wasted is compensated with better attention when program continues.
- The Pattern "Change the Tempo" In Pedagogical Patterns is an example of a way to meet learning students needs.[8]

- A guide in a museum will notice the group members moving towards displays other than the one being discussed or generally drifting away from the group or small conversations going inside the group, all those will hint the guide to cut the present explanation short and either move on to the next exhibit or find out from the group where their interests are or what bothers them.

Resulting context

Having attended to non-verbal messages, you may have learned of problems you were not aware of, and you can apply your mind to solving them or involve the group in finding a solution.

Also you gain better attention and cooperation from group members. Hopefully, this will also enhance their willingness to share their needs and problems more easily.

Field Day

Deep in sea, homesick sailors become sloppy in work.

Context

Group members are people who have many dimensions. While in the context of your group they are committed to the group and its goals, they also have other commitments outside of the group.

Problem

Conflict of interests between commitments to the group and its goals to other, outside obligations may affect group members up to damaging performance and achievements. Commitment to the group and its goals can sometimes conflict with other commitments or avocations. Work can take a toll both from the worker and from their closest support circle (i.e. friends, family). This conflict can create powerful cognitive dissonance with the group members that their contribution to the group can be affected.

Forces

- While in the context of your group they are committed to the group and its goals, they also have other commitments outside of the group.
- Commitment to the group and its goals can sometimes conflict with other commitments or avocations.
- Pressures by outside affiliations can influence personal moral and even performance.
- Acquaintance with the group, its goals and members helps rallying the family members and close circle to the "cause" to which the group member feels committed.
- People may worry about exposure of their personal lives

Solution

From time to time create opportunities to involve, reward and meet the close circle of people surrounding the team members. Make sure that during these occasions, or at summation opportunities and especially at project end there is acknowledgement to the sacrifices, personal prices, and contributions of the families of the group members.

These events should be structured so as to ease the gap between the different personae of the group members to reduce embarrassment and enhance the affectivity of compensation.

Acknowledging the problems is partial compensation for the personal price paid.

Precautions

It is advisable to create such occasions spontaneously as well as in a planned way during the year (Jiggle [4]), so it doesn't become a hollow ritual.

Known Uses

- Many High-Tech companies reward their employees by inviting them and their partners to a social evening, or a formal dinner.
- Organizations carry out a 'fun day', where all group members have a day off, bringing their families in for collective fun activities.

Resulting context

By acknowledging the contributions of the personal support network of each group member to the goal of the team and the price the pay some compensation is awarded the important people and the team members themselves.

Grand Finale

5 , 4 , 3 , 2 , 1 …   nothing???

Context

The end of a program has as much importance to the participants of the overall perception of success as the work to achieve the goals.

Problem

Having put so much effort into creating and maintaining group cohesion it is distressing for both group members and leaders to see it end. Especially with a successful group, when the project ends group members need a closure to the experience, and wish to preserve the good relations created, the memory of a good experience.

Forces

- An end of a good experience causes sadness and a sense of loss and people need a way to deal with these feelings.
- When people put a lot of work into the creation and maintenance of a well working, cohesive group, they need closure to part from the experiences they put effort into.
- Perception of an experience is influenced by it's ending.
- Severing the social connections is helped by ceremonies (in anthropology they would be called rites).

Solution

Make a 'grand finale' to your program. Use the good feelings to give a "final good taste" at the closure of the experience. Help members preserve connections through a contact list perhaps, or declaring a way for contact in the future.
Give a final summation of the achievements of the group, maybe a vision connecting the past work to the future. Make sure there is room for thanks to all who contributed, acknowledgment of the individual and collective effort.

Known Uses

- Every Group celebrates the end of its mission in an official or unofficial manner. Either a party, or a series of occasions such as lectures, cocktails, luncheons and such alike that give the group members time to close this period in their life (closure) with an official recognition of the efforts they gave into the project.
- **Failed Project Wake** pattern [9] is a private instance of this pattern reminding group leaders that especially in failed or interrupted projects human nature still needs a closure to the experience into which the group members contributed time, labor, and intellectual efforts. In unexpectedly severing of social structure and relations people are left grieving without closure.
- When a group ends its time together, on the final days (or hours) of the program, group members engage in a series of parting ceremonies, demonstrating the human need to cope with the loss of friends, structure and the experience.

Resulting context

By recognizing people's need for closure, for celebrating the achievement at both team and personal levels, you are making it easier for the team members to better cope with the loss they encounter when the team ends its life.

References:

1 Developmental Sequence in Small Groups, Tuckman,B., Psychological Bulletin,1965

2 Organizational Patterns, Neil B. Harrison, PLoPD1

3 Instructions for Mariners Respecting the Management of Ships at Single Anchor,
and General Rules for Sailing, also Directions for Crossing the North Sea, the Cattegat, &c.,
with an address to seamen: to which is prefixed a memoir of the author's life. by Henry Taylor
Memoirs, &c. http://www.bruzelius.info/Nautica/Seamanship/Taylor(1861).html

4 The wisdom of teams, Katzenbach J. and Smith D., MkKinsey and Co, Inc, 1993

5 Patterns for Group Leadership, Ofra Homsky, EuroPLoP 2002

6 DECODING BODY LANGUAGE, http://www.johnmole.com/articles18.htm

7 The NONVERBAL DICTIONARY of GESTURES, SIGNS & BODY LANGUAGE CUES
http://members.aol.com/doder1/bendawa1.htm

8 Awkward Situations in the Pedagogical Patterns Project
http://csis.pace.edu/~bergin/patterns/AwkwardSituations.html

9 Organizational Design Patterns, Jim Coplien and Neil B. Harrison, PLoPD2