



Put Me In, Coach: Creating A Cooperative Work Environment

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Management techniques for more "traditional" industries often just don't hold up in the game development arena. Game developers are constantly incorporating new technology within product, and within the product development cycle, and all while managers must supervise a diverse team of artistic and creative people. It is this combination of technology utilization and workforce creativity that creates this industry's more "unusual" work environment, and makes managing it a special challenge.

Compounding this challenge, managers, technical leads, and producers often find themselves with the additional pressure of profit and loss responsibility for multi-million-dollar development projects. Game development management includes the responsibility to design, develop, and release to market a compelling and technically advanced product. And do it within a specific time-frame. And, by the way, retain your talent.

So, how do you manage a diverse team of programmers, artists, and designers and deliver a great game? How does Bill Belichick manage a team of a diverse team of multi-millionaires and win the Super Bowl?

By being a coach, not a boss.

In the unusual, pressure-filled work environment of game development, it's time to start thinking of yourself as a coach, rather than a boss. Implementing a cooperative work environment and becoming a coach, rather than a boss who issues orders, will go far in helping you gain control over your development projects, create eager participation from your team, and develop a culture that helps you retain your talent. And all without the risk of getting doused by a large bucket of ice.

What does it take to transform into coach mode? How much personal change is required on your part? That depends on you. If your management style to date has been the traditional boss/subordinate thing, then, initially, this "coaching" approach may feel very fake and unnatural to you, but here are some suggestions to begin your transformation:

1. Fake it 'til you make it.

Practice coaching by just being a coach. Your development team will observe how you show up and, then, mirror that behavior. If you freak out emotionally when problems rear their ugly head, then your team will be reluctant to inform you when a problem begins to surface. On the other hand, if you are cooperative and work with others in a spirit of teamwork, you will get back likewise behavior, as well as open and honest feedback from your team on the health/status of your development project.

2. Encourage teamwork within your Group by encouraging your staff to participate and make suggestions on how their work is done.

One of the best examples in game industry annals of how a company can encourage teamwork was with the old management team at the game company, Dynamix (those *Red Baron* folks). They had a unique approach for fostering a cooperative work environment.



They encouraged their development team members to become active participants in determining how the design and development cycle for the game could be accomplished, considering the time and budget constraints executive management had in mind. Jointly, the team would agree on a development timeline and completion date. Then, the timeline was presented back to executive management for approval. This approach accomplished many things for Dynamix:

- It got "buy in" from the development team on the project.
- It presented a realistic development cycle to executive management. In other words, it was not just some fantasy delivery date that everyone knew was an impossible deadline to meet.
- It made the producer in charge of the development project feel more in control and empowered his authority.

Upper management at Dynamix was clever because they took this one step further. If the development team said it would take 12 months to deliver this product, they really wanted it complete in 10 months. So they used a creative bonus incentive program. The team would get bonus x if they made the delivery date of 12 months. However, if the team made the delivery date one month earlier they would earn a higher bonus and get a few extra days off work.

If the team completed the project two months earlier (the real date management wanted), then the bonus became exceptionally attractive, such as a royalty-type program based on sales that lasted as long as the team member was an employee, and as long as the product sold. The few days off became a full week and some extras were thrown in like a party, vacation, bonus money, etc.

Guess which game company in the early '90s had the strongest reputation in the business for producing products on time and within budget? Guess who had better employee retention? In the hustle and bustle of game development today, and the ever-increasing "burn out" rate and tales of "ea_spouse," it's important to think in terms of teamplay.

3. Be careful in how you problem solve and the criticism you verbalize.

Transitioning from a manager who is an order-giver to a coach is learning a lot about letting go of some of your responsibilities, duties, and "control." This was probably the most difficult hurdle in becoming a coach. Bill Belichick isn't on the field and when the opposing team goes for the blitz, Tom Brady must decide what to do with that ball. Experiment with allowing some of your employees to make decisions about their work without getting your approval.

This does not mean you don't need to touch base once a week to discuss progress and hurdles faced. Rather, it means let go, ease up, and get less involved in the minute details. Your lead artist knows how long it takes to render an image, allow him or her to set their own schedule and the schedules of their team members. Sure, mistakes will be made as you teach and allow an employee to make more of their own work decisions. This is a learning process for both you and your staff as you transition to being a coach.

When mistakes or problems arise don't "freak-out" emotionally. Don't verbalize your frustration or annoyance with anger or in an outburst. Don't criticize. These behaviors only push people away from you and shut them down. Stay focused on the problem at hand and proposed solutions to the problem. Train your team leads not only to approach you when there are problems, but also bring to you two or three possible solutions for the problem. Your management meeting can then be focused on which solution gets implemented.



It's an interesting paradigm shift: be in control by letting go of control. This approach fosters open communication and a safe space to interact within. You have set the meeting up to be empowering for your team lead. You have set the stage for joint problem solving. You have become a coach.