



April 7, 2014

Agenda:

- Article of the Week—“A Simple Test of Leadership” (Gamasutra)
 - http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/KeithFuller/20140403/214697/A_Simple_Test_of_Leadership.php
- Officer Nominations
- Elections to be held next Monday!
- 2 weeks left before final build submissions—due April 21st
 - Final Developer’s Meetup weekend before submission—April 18th-20th
- 3rd Annual Student Showcase—April 25th

A Simple Test of Leadership by Keith Fuller

In the 13 years I spent as a developer I worked at two studios, and since I started doing leadership consulting I’ve become familiar with dozens more. As a result I’ve found I can now quickly reach a fairly accurate assessment of the quality of leadership at companies of various sizes. To be sure, the more time you have to spend learning about an organization, the more precise you can be. By obtaining answers to the following questions, though, I can get a pretty clear image in just a few hours. I bet you can, too.

I mention this here because I believe game developers deserve the best possible leadership, but at the same time we typically fall woefully short of properly scrutinizing the leaders we already have. For more than a decade I just threw my hands up along with so many others. “It is what it is.”

That’s not a solution. That’s the *problem*.

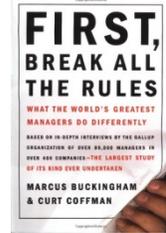
Consider whether these questions (and the answers they elicit) are important to you, then consider what to do about it at your company.

1. **Is leadership the default career path?** As Buckingham and Coffman (and 25 years of research) indicate in [First Break All the Rules](#), one of the most certain ways to riddle your company with



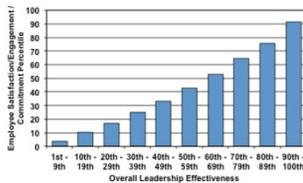
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deficient leaders is to promote subject matter experts to leadership simply because they're excellent contributors. The typical thinking is, "You're such a good programmer, we're promoting you to lead programmer," when the two skillsets in question don't necessarily have even the smallest of intersection. You may as well say, "You're such a good programmer, we're promoting you to concept artist."



- 2. **Does everyone get regular one-on-one meetings with their lead (preferably at least once per month)?** Forging a personal connection with the people you lead is possibly the most important task in front of you as a leader. The number one reason people leave a company is because of a crummy supervisor. Developing a rapport with your team increases their engagement and decreases turnover. [Doing the opposite yields the opposite](#). If you're the lead, don't wait for someone else to create a company policy or tell you what to do. YOU schedule time with your people. It shows them you care and makes you more effective at your job.

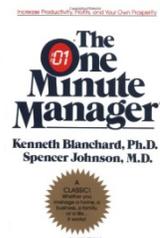
- 3. **How often do employees receive performance reviews?** In the past few months I've told multiple clients: if you're only doing performance reviews once a year, just stop doing reviews. You'll save yourself a ton of time and energy and you'll no longer be fooling yourself with the false belief that you're helping your people and your company. We humans do a horrible job of remembering positive events and we're much too quick to let them be overshadowed by negative ones.



That's not a business thing, that's simple psychology. How useful, then, is eleven-month old information about a team member? For a better approach, read Blanchard's [The One Minute Manager](#). Or do what my friend Josh Nilson does. He's now CEO of East Side Games in Vancouver, but as COO he implemented the practice of having every employee get a review every two weeks. Every. Two. Weeks. And the results were wonderful.

- 4. **What's the attitude about continuous improvement?** This isn't just a cool buzzword, it's a leadership principle. At the 2010 IGDA Leadership Forum, Riot Games president Marc Merrill said, "We never assume we're as optimal at ANYTHING as we can be." I'd have to say using Riot as an example for successful business practices is probably an OK move. As a counter example, I once visited a company where a studio leader pointed out a disgruntled artist and told me they'd been unhappy with their role in the company. How long? TWO YEARS. If your company's leadership is OK with letting relationships deteriorate for that long, I'd challenge their dedication to continuous improvement at any level.

- 5. **Does anyone receive specific training in leadership skills?** It is frighteningly common to see a studio where leaders have arrived in their current roles without ever having been told how to be a lead. That's how I received my first "promotion" to leadership years ago and it's still a widespread problem. Many companies seem to assume that because someone has been around long enough, or shipped enough games, or is the studio head's buddy, they're going to make an acceptable lead. Even if you're surrounded by the best examples of leadership our industry has to offer, it's exceedingly difficult to learn on the fly and effectively switch gears from contributor to leader without explicit training. And how often does anyone find themselves surrounded by exceptional leaders, anyway? If osmosis from similarly untrained leaders is the preferred teaching method for leadership, you're inflicting a dark spiral of inbred deficiency on your employees.





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There are many additional questions you could ask, but even just these five will start to paint the picture. While I'm definitely advising you to ask these questions, I'm not recommending open revolt or mass departures if you find the answers wanting. Instead, engage your studio leaders in a discussion of these issues. It may well be that existing senior leadership values nepotism over training, or prizes keeping veterans happy over filling roles based on [emotional intelligence](#). That's their prerogative. Once you achieve clarity on your values and those of the studio, though, you should be prepared to act on them. Otherwise, "it is what it is" is all it will ever be.

Addenda

The five questions above aren't the only ones worth asking. By all means, add your own leadership questions in the comments. Here are a few more to get you started:

Does everyone have a mentor?

Are the expectations of leadership positions explicitly stated?

How do team members speak about leaders when they aren't present?

Do leaders ask their team members, "How can I help you develop professionally?"

Can every employee answer clearly and immediately when asked, "Who's your lead?"

Does senior leadership boil down to controlling through fear?