

FEATURED ARTICLE



BUILDING A STRONG TEAM

BY STEVE LEWIS | SPONSORED BY SIOR FOUNDATION



Good teams have leaders. Strong teams have strong leaders. Strength begins at the top.

While each leader is a unique individual, SIORs agree that there are strategies and attributes that are common to all exceptional leaders and the strong teams they build. Among these, they say, are being a good listener and setting a good example for the team.

"A good leader is someone willing to listen to everyone; they recognize that teammates need to feel they're getting a fair shake in terms of having their ideas heard," says Rick Urbanczyk, SIOR, executive vice president at JLL Calgary, Ala. "One needs to understand how each team member is motivated and know how to kickstart the day."

"It's much more common to find brokers who have leading revenue-generating abilities than ones who also possess collaborative team skills and exhibit high ethical and moral standards," adds David Pennetta, SIOR, executive director, Cushman & Wakefield of Long Island, N.Y. "As a team leader, it's your responsibility to set the tone for the group. It's important for clients and customers to see similarly styled individuals on your team to show you can successfully delegate work to team members when necessary. Work habits must be consistent within the team, as well. Communication is paramount."

Shaun McCullough, SIOR, principal with Lee & Associates, Los Angeles/Long Beach, Calif., says, "You've got to have somebody who shows up, takes accountability, and gives their most precious commodity:



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time. You have to set a good example by being there and being accountable.”

“Strong teams win because they endure all of the challenges that they face,” notes Gbenga Ismail, SIOR, of Ismail and Partners in Lagos State, Nigeria. “How we succeed depends on the collaboration and team brought together to execute this objective.”

Every leader, he continues, must have the special skill of listening. “You must hear the cracks in the wall. In order to fine-tune the team, you must know what needs to be fine-tuned.”

“First and foremost, you have to get people who want to be friends and who are already friends,” says Arlon Brown, SIOR, senior advisor, SVN/Parsons Commercial Group, Boston. “Then you take it to the next level.”

As for what makes a strong leader, Brown says the biggest thing is getting everyone on the team to function as a group and having clear and understandable ground rules on the commission split. Beyond that, he adds, “You show by example, and take everyone’s thoughts and input into consideration.”

Mike Spears, SIOR, managing principal, Lee & Associates | Houston, says one of the biggest mistakes that leaders make is micro-managing. “You may be the best person to do something, but the team leader should be less concerned about

how to go from point A to point B, as much as whether you do get from point A to point B; let them do it their way, give them advice along the way,” he recommends.

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

Naturally, it’s important to put together a team of great talent, people who are proven performers, but beyond that, say SIORs, it’s important to create a team of people with diverse skillsets as well as diverse backgrounds and mindsets.

“The number one challenge is to get people who have similar goals but who are different,” says Brown. “We have three guys and one woman, with diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds, and they all live in different communities (spreading the geographic reach of the team.) But at the same time, they need to all have a similar vision of what we’re trying to do.”

Urbanczyk agrees but says it hasn’t been easy. “It’s been a challenge because our industry is not a diverse industry; it’s very male dominated,” he says, but adds that he has taken on the challenge of finding diversity in age, gender, and ethnicity: “Different minds always working for the same goal,” he notes.

It’s taken time, he admits, but says he now has “a very happy, top-performing

team in Calgary.” How did he do it? He says he first sought to include an age gap among brokers, then he looked for a female broker, and so on, using university internships, summer placements and research positions (which he specifically sought) to help grow the broker side.

Ismail concurs. “I believe diverse skills are important,” he asserts. “With SIOR, it is absolutely necessary to deal with a majority of the issues that we are involved with. This includes communicating, planning, reporting, and analysis, among others.”

“To support a full team, you need to be able to function competitively within different market sectors,” adds Pennetta. “Even just the office sector is made up of leasing, sub-leasing, user building sales, investment sales, and development. A diverse team also enables you to benefit from cross referrals from each of these sub-sectors.”

While diversity can clearly be a team’s strong point, it can also be challenging—especially when it comes to the age gap, says Spears. “Culture is very difficult with the younger generation; it’s a bigger gap between generations than I’ve ever seen, from work ethic to views on certain [aspects of job performance --i.e., the value of e-mail vs. phone conversations]” Still, he says, teams are made up of varying personalities, and while some may not blend well, “it’s vital to keep bringing youth in.”

So how does he address this challenge? “In one respect you have to make efforts to adapt to the way they do things,” he says. “Put more emphasis on the strengths they have. Learn to listen.”

McCullough recommends that you “fill voids in the team, place members in field that strategically give you the best chances to win; you’re only as good as your weakest link. For us, there are people better at taking meetings in person. That may be a senior member, while a younger one may have more hustle. Some take up their time with Excel spreadsheets.”

KEEPING IT INTERESTING

Good brokers will naturally be driven to succeed, so lack of motivation to perform should not be one of the greatest challenges that face a team. However, a successful broker can work anywhere, and a team can only be strong if it stays together. So, what does a team leader do to make being on the team consistently stimulating—and perhaps even fun?

“The first thing is good communication among all team members—not only business discussions, but asking about each other’s families in the morning,” says Brown. “If someone has a five-year-old, did he get off school OK? How is he feeling? Talk about Sunday’s football game. Take a personal interest in people.”

“One thing we pride ourselves in is that our core group has been together for seven years; our competitors can’t say that,” adds Urbanczyk. “The big thing is we’ve turned the traditional model [of compensation] upside down. I have an incentivized model to organically grow their business; if they can do that, they get the benefit of the higher split. Team members stay loyal, knowing there is no ceiling on client growth and revenue growth.”

To keep the operations of the team fresh and exciting, he leads a lot of team building exercises. “In any industry the day-to-day activity can be monotonous and can get on the boring side,” he admits. So, he puts together an annual team reward trip, a four-day weekend for all members. “We also have events where we integrate family into summer or Christmas events, as well as birthday lunches,” he shares.

“Having a strong team in which players are engaged, appreciated, and able to grow and succeed makes people stay for a long time,” adds Pennetta. “Your team should really feel like a family, or at least a strongly-knit group of friends. Each individual needs to feel appreciated, safe, and that they have the ability and good will to grow. Everyone has differing capabilities, strengths, and life/financial goals; it’s not a one size fits all. A leader needs to find the best in each individual and help them reach and hopefully even exceed their goals.”

“My team does a lot of stuff ‘off the field,’ whether it’s golf, dinner, or a show,” adds McCullough. “Enjoy the wins and going after new stuff, too.” He also recommends making team members “a bit uncomfortable” by having them pursue new product types. “If you do not continue to adapt and reinvent yourself several times a year, you can become complacent—and that’s the number one killer in this field,” he warns.

Spears agrees. “If the only thing you do is work, that’s bad,” he says. “This is a stressful, high-pressure job; most brokers are all commission. At the same time, you need to relax a bit—take a Friday afternoon and do some things outside the office.”

Spears says his team also has a Fantasy Football league and meetings on non-real estate topics, such as managing your taxes, or life insurance policies.

“I believe those who stay on, stay on because they are fulfilled, and enjoy what they are doing,” says Ismail. “One of the ways to keep people committed is to continuously give them new challenges. Once they have mastered this, then on to a new one. Therefore, you must always have the scope for expansion—otherwise, people will start to look outside.”

“The team leader has to have a fresh and exciting demeanor—always learning and constantly experimenting,” says Pennetta. “You can learn from anybody, even the newest team member.”

BE AN EXAMPLE

Building and keeping a strong team also involves showing team members the kind of broker—and the kind of person—you want them to be. “You’ve got to be the example everyone looks to on the team,” says Urbanczyk. The key to that, he says, is to be well respected. “On the team, that’s based on how you perform—your expectations drop down to everyone else,” he says. That’s why, Urbanczyk concludes, respect between team members and the team lead “are crucial.”

“Accountability. Go shoulder to shoulder in meetings rather than having a vertical structure,” McCullough recommends. “Although you’ve gained experience and knowledge and prowess, have a little humility. That sets a good example.”

“The leader must be the most committed member of the team,” adds Ismail. “The team serves itself and forms its bond

through the commitment shown by the leader."

Pennetta agrees. "People want to work with leaders who they can look up to," he says. Successful leaders, he continues, are visible, vocal, and active in the business community. "A true leader motivates team members and helps individuals cultivate the best version of themselves," he adds. "Sometimes that requires spending extra time with team members and their spouses or families and really getting to know the individual on a personal level. Real estate brokerage is difficult on many levels, including being very time consuming, so it's helpful to have spousal buy-in to the commitment and lifestyle."

LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE

Team leaders are almost always individuals with a good deal of experience. Thus, there are lessons they've learned that they can share with the team, or lessons that will help them make and keep the team as strong as possible.

For example, says Urbanczyk, one of the hardest lessons he has learned is when you should grow people over time, and when someone may not be worth the investment. "If they are not, you have to cut them sooner or later," he says. "We've invested too long in some cases."

"We always try to restack when there's a void, but do not load up too heavily in any one area; be thoughtful in your approach," McCullough advises. "Don't burn young guys out. Take steps to train people properly—don't just give them stuff

because you're too busy." In addition, he advises that you share the wealth. "If you become a pig, people get pissed," he says.

"When you recognize talent, it may not even be best that they stay with you," says Spears. "You need to give them the ability to advance." He adds that some of the most valuable lessons you can teach your team are mistakes you've made, or ones that they can make. In other words, what NOT to do.

"Oftentimes, we just hire because of paper—the good resume—and that's not always the right way to do it," he concedes. "You have to take time. You have to meet and engage them."

"When hiring newer brokers who don't have an established reputation or track record, you are required to rely solely on the interview process," adds Pennetta. "As a leader, you need to have sharp empath skills to successfully navigate this labyrinth."

You also need to be realistic, Ismail cautions. "There is no perfect team," he asserts. "It is a work in progress." ♥



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