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Column: An agile testing future

Lead yourself!

by Huib Schoots

There is a lot to be said about management and leadership in IT. This column is about a very specific kind of leadership: self-leadership. It is about you and about being a true leader of yourself. There is no one who needs more management than you. We constantly manage ourselves; we need self-management to do everything we do. You can try to manage yourself, but I would advise to start being a true leader for yourself.

“Management is doing things right: about being efficient, leadership is doing the right things: about being effective”¹. The difference between management and leadership is described in the article I recently read on changingminds.org about leadership vs. management². The main difference is that managers have subordinates and leaders have followers. The list in this article gives a good insight in the difference.

In the TED talk “How great leaders inspire action”³, Simon Sinek illustrates that a cause helps people to get inspired. In his talk he says: “Those who lead inspire us. We follow them not because we have to, but because we want to. We follow those who lead not for them, but for ourselves. And it is those who start with “why”, that have the ability to inspire those around them and find others who inspire them”.

In the video Sinek also tells a story about the run for the first flight. The Wright Brothers work with almost no budget and tooling but are driven by a cause, a purpose and a belief. In comparison, their competitor Langley is driven by results: he wanted to become rich and famous. We all know who were the first to fly. This story gives us an interesting message: inspiration and dedication drive success. And that is the key to leadership!

You can manage yourself by having objectives and making short-term plans. Reacting to things happening, focusing on what you can get out of situations. Not taking too much risk by taking the beaten path. Or you can make things happen by critically trying new things, following your heart by doing those things that you believe in, and by giving yourself energy by being proactive.

Some weeks ago I had an interesting conversation with a tester friend. He was complaining about his work, the chances he doesn't get, and he was obviously demotivated and blaming people around him. It was a nice sunny day and we took a walk to buy a sandwich. After the walk we sat and had coffee. I listened to his story and asked some questions to keep his story going. When I asked him about his future plans and ambitions, he gave me an interesting answer: “I don't have a plan, I always take things as they come”. Then I asked him about what he finds important in his job and why. It became silent. He didn't have a clear answer.

Self-management is hard. Being a leader of yourself is even harder. It takes a lot of courage, vision and self-knowledge. Taking chances will make you fail once or twice. But by making mistakes you will become stronger and you will learn from them. One of my teachers often said: when you do something you like, you need to practice to get better. The better you get, the more you are going to enjoy it. The more you enjoy it, the more you will do it. A beneficial circle that empowers itself.

In “self-managing your career”⁴ Gwen McCauley describes seven steps to effectively self-manage your career. She states that there is incredible freedom that comes from taking charge of your life and career, and I can only agree. Know yourself, invest in yourself and know what you want and why you want it. Another inspiring and useful model I find in Stephen Covey's seven habits of highly effective people. Widely known and often used when talking about leadership. For those who are not familiar with this awesome book, here they are:

1. Be proactive
2. Begin with the end in mind
3. Put first things first
4. Think win/win
5. Seek first to understand, then to be understood
6. Synergize
7. Sharpen the saw

Stephen Covey: Seven habits of highly effective people⁵

1 Drucker, Peter F. The Practice of Management. Oxford: Elsevier Ltd., 1955.

2 http://changingminds.org/disciplines/leadership/articles/manager_leader.htm

3 http://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action.html

4 http://www.ouicoach.com/docs/car_self-managing.pdf

5 <https://www.stephencovey.com/7habits/7habits.php>

When you study books and articles about leadership, you will discover that almost all mention doing things because you believe in them and doing things proactively. Try Google and find some interesting articles written about self-leadership. I found “Self-Leadership: Leading Yourself to Personal Excellence”⁶ and “12 Rules for Self-Leadership”⁷; two articles which I like.

The following personal story illustrates the importance of trying to be a true leader of yourself: Many years ago I did one of my first projects in a lead role. I wasn't happy and was complaining a lot. Things didn't go as I wanted and I was blaming everybody and everything around me. The project I did wasn't going the way it should be at all. On a Friday afternoon my manager called me into his office and 30 minutes later I stood outside with the minutes of our short conversation, signed by two managers and myself. This was a “noted conversation” as it was called and it was one step away from an official warning, two steps away from getting fired. That night I had a beer with a friend in a bar and I was furious. How could they do this to me? He asked me a simple question: “Is the feedback they gave you honest and true?” “Yes, but...” I started and then it became clear to me, it was me who had to do something. On Monday I called my manager and asked if he could explain what he expected me to change. And, even more important, I asked for help.

So how does self-management or self-leadership relate to agile or – since I am a tester – to testing? Agile is a mindset and relies heavily on people collaborating, continuous improvement and learning to excel. In an agile environment the team is focused on people and relations. A winning team for a project is built around motivated individuals. The team is responsible for their work and they are often less managed. Because the team is more self-responsible, it is more likely that people will look beyond their disciplines and help each other to get the job done. And everything is happening in short iterations. Here we need self-management: doing things right, but even more we need self-leadership doing the right things.

In (agile) testing I see a parallel: of course all the stuff mentioned above applies. But let's have a closer look. Good testing in general, but exploratory testing in particular, requires a lot of self-management. Excellent testing requires self-leadership. Michael Bolton wrote a nice post on his blog called “heuristics and leadership”⁸ where he says: “We believe that excellent testing starts with the skill set and the mindset of the individual tester. Other things might help, but excellence in testing must centre on the tester”. He also did a great presentation titled “Exploratory testing (and leadership)”⁹ in 2009 that is very worthwhile checking (or should I say testing?).

6 <http://www.emergingleader.com/article4.shtml>

7 <http://www.lifehack.org/articles/lifestyle/12-rules-for-self-leadership.html>

8 <http://www.developsense.com/blog/2010/05/heuristics-and-leadership>

9 <http://www.developsense.com/presentations/2009-11-STC9000-ExploratoryTestingLeadership.pdf>

So, in short, stop managing yourself and start leading yourself into a bright future!

References and links

1. Drucker, Peter F. The Practice of Management. Oxford: Elsevier Ltd., 1955.
2. http://changingminds.org/disciplines/leadership/articles/manager_leader.htm
3. http://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action.html
4. http://www.ouicoach.com/docs/car_self-managing.pdf
5. <https://www.stephencovey.com/7habits/7habits.php>
6. <http://www.emergingleader.com/article4.shtml>
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8. <http://www.developsense.com/blog/2010/05/heuristics-and-leadership>
9. <http://www.developsense.com/presentations/2009-11-STC9000-ExploratoryTestingLeadership.pdf>

> About the author



Huib Schoots

has 15 years experience in IT and software testing. After studying Business Informatics he became a developer. Soon he discovered that development was not his cup of tea and software testing is fun. Huib has experience in various roles such as tester, test coordinator, test manager, trainer, coach, but also in project management.

He is currently Team Manager Testing at Rabobank International. He tries to share his passion for testing with others through coaching, training and giving presentations on different test subjects.

Huib sees himself as a context-driven tester. He is curious, passionate and has (unsuccessfully) attempted to read everything published on software testing ever written. He is a board member of TestNet, the association of testers in the Netherlands. He is a member of DEWT (Dutch Exploratory Workshop on Testing), student at the Miagi-Do School of Software Testing and maintains a blog on magnifiant.com