

# When To Protect Your Team

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It's time to work on *you*, so sit back and listen to practical, actionable advice to accelerate your progress.

In this lesson, we will discuss the importance of protecting your team, when you should do it and what they may need protection from.

It's all about ensuring your team's work environment is one where they can do their best work.

We can see the benefits of protecting your team with an example from the world of football. Even if you're not a big fan of the beautiful game, you may have seen or heard about football manager Jose Mourinho.

Mourinho was highly successful from 2002 to 2010 across stints at multiple teams. He had a reputation as a manager who fought hard to protect his players, creating an atmosphere of unity where those players would then run through brick walls for their manager. During this period, he won everything there was to win.

But since 2010, something has changed. Mourinho has become prone to publicly slamming his players, fighting with them and generally looking to shield himself from criticism, instead placing it all on players who underperform or don't follow his instructions.

Since this incarnation of Mourinho appeared on the scene, the trophy haul has dwindled, and all his managerial tenures have ended in infighting, acrimony and a toxic atmosphere. That toxic atmosphere destroyed the confidence of those he was paid to manage before he was eventually sacked. Paul Pogba, whom Mourinho broke the world record to sign for an eye-watering £89 million, accused Mourinho of "going against the players" and making out-of-favour players feel "like they don't exist anymore". When one player, Luke Shaw, returned to the team and put in his best performance for some time, Mourinho claimed to have had to coach him from the touchline and "made every decision for him".

It may seem that professional football is incomparable to most work. Still, at the risk of sounding trite, people are people, and any good leader knows the benefit of protecting your team instead of leaving them to look after themselves or, even worse, actively blaming them.

So, we agree that teams need protection. But what do they need protection from?

Firstly, your team needs protection from your own worst instincts [1].

Leaders and managers can often give in to their desire for meetings about everything. "Rather than trawling through a bunch of documents and emails, how about we get together, and you can talk me through it?"

That may seem convenient to you. However, it isn't ideal for your team members who have work to get done and a schedule to which they're working. Try to reduce the frequency of meetings to a few times a week – perhaps at the start to set out the goals for the week and the end to see how everyone has done – unless completely necessary.

Also, avoid being late to meetings. Of course, you're busy, and lots of people are pulling for your time. But by turning up late, you show a lack of respect and care for your employees. You're also just setting a poor example.

The same principle goes for allowing the meetings to run long. Maybe your four o'clock was cancelled, so you have some extra time for extolling your wisdom to your followers. The problem is that they may have switched off after half an hour.

Will Wright, designer of computer games The Sims and Spore, used his most impatient team member as a litmus test for when his meetings were running on too long [1]. As soon as this designer became obviously bored or asked to be excused, Wright would take that as the signal to end the whole meeting and let people get back to work. Do you have a team member who you could similarly watch?

Next up on the list of evils you must protect your team from is external intrusions.

Being the shield between your team and the rest of the organization may be your most important job as their leader.

Management expert Henry Mintzberg wrote, "Someone, only half in jest, once defined the manager as that person who sees visitors so that everyone else can get his work done." [1] As the boss, you don't really have a hope of protecting yourself from constant interruptions, but you can be a wall between those interruptions and your team.

That is especially essential in helping team members whose work requires long stretches of focused time, such as coders, designers and engineers, from being regularly bothered by those on the outside.

You may even want to go further and make "thinking time" official, like Intel engineer Nathan Zeldes did. He took 300 managers and engineers and had them join a programme where, for four hours once a week, they went offline from email and IM, put their phones to voicemail, avoided scheduling meetings and even put up "do not disturb" signs on their doors. [1]

The results showed that this "thinking time" enhanced effectiveness, efficiency, and quality of life for numerous employees, with 71% of participants saying it should be extended to the rest of the company.

You may not be able to implement something quite as radical. However, you can filter unnecessary information from getting to your team [2], such as editing overly long documents down to the key points and fighting back against the bureaucracy that is high on time suck and low on usefulness.

You must also protect your team from bad calls by the higher-ups.

That isn't telling you to outright rebel against your bosses anytime you don't like a decision. Still, if an organisation-wide directive is introduced that your team finds to hamper their productivity, you shouldn't be afraid to push back respectfully [3].

Often, those at the top of a company don't have detailed knowledge of what is happening below them. As a manager who knows the reality of the situation, you have a responsibility to inform the C-suite if they have brought in a change that is causing more harm than good.

Your team will thank you for it, increasing their trust in you.

Our next piece of advice is to praise publicly but disapprove privately [4].

Whatever your second-grade teacher may have us believe, embarrassment and fear are not good motivators.

If one of your team has done a good job, congratulate them publicly so that the rest of the team and organisation know about their achievements.

Suppose you must have a difficult conversation with an employee who has let their standards slip. Keep it private. Even if it's just a simple, "learn from this mistake and do better next time", it will feel one-hundred times worse if you deliver it in front of an audience.

Also, as a leader who protects their team, it is up to you to take the heat.

Although it won't always be fun, as the manager, you will sometimes need to take the blame for a mistake made by one of your team. After all, there should never be a single point of failure, and you are responsible for ensuring that the team is fully trained, that they know how to do their work, and for guaranteeing the quality of their output. Blame

culture is toxic, so shielding your people is where you will really earn their respect, trust and loyalty.

You are also responsible for protecting your team from those invisible dangers such as burnout [5].

Humans don't leave their troubles at the door when sitting down to work. If one of your team members is struggling, speak to them about what they need and how you can help make their working day more pleasant, even if you can't help with the non-work issues. It could be as simple as pushing back a deadline to alleviate a little pressure for them.

Another way you can ease their mental concerns is by always ensuring they are clear on what you expect of them. Few things are more stressful than being given a task you don't completely understand and are unsure how to complete.

Finally, help them to detach in the evenings. Smartphones have meant we're all subjected to our email inbox 24/7, but this dramatically impacts work/life balance and takes a toll over time.

Encourage your team members to silence their work email from a particular time each day and, unless absolutely necessary, avoid them working beyond the designated workday. If they can't avoid it, consider letting them have a late start sometime the next week or inform them they can leave early on the following Friday.

It will be appreciated and ultimately help you build a high-performing, energised, happy team.

As their manager, your job is to protect your team so they can do their best work.

This week, take some time to consider which areas you may be weakest in and consciously look to improve. Even better, seek some open and honest feedback from your team. Ask what they feel could be tweaked to make their work-life happier and enable them to be their best.

That's all for today. Thanks for listening, and remember: keep building the best you.

[1] *Managing Yourself: The Boss as Human Shield*, Robert I. Sutton (2010)  
<https://hbr.org/2010/09/managing-yourself-the-boss-as-human-shield>

[2] *8 tips for workplace leaders on how to 'protect the team'*, Maureen Moriarty (2014)  
<https://www.bizjournals.com/seattle/blog/2014/08/8tips-for-workplace-leaders-on-how-to-protect-the.html>

[3] *Protecting your team in a competitive workplace*, Laura Stack,  
<http://productivemag.com/22/protecting-your-team-in-a-competitive-workplace>

[4] *Take Care of Employees: Protect Them at All Costs*, Marcus Le Monis (2020)

<https://www.marcuslemonis.com/business/protecting-people>

[5] *How to Protect Your Team From Burnout*, Mallory Stratton (2022)

<https://thriveglobal.com/stories/protect-team-burnout-stress-managing-tips/>