



FROM SUPPORT TO SPONSORSHIP

High-pressure moments are familiar territory for any team. Deadlines approach, targets loom, and expectations rise. In these moments, leaders face a critical choice: Do we add more pressure to "push" results, or do we become a filter that protects the team's energy so they can perform their best?

Many leaders believe that "pushing" is the only way to meet a goal. However, true leadership, and what I call **true sponsorship** - is about removing friction, not adding force.



Case Study

The 48-Hour Sales Sprint

Many years ago, I served as a Front Office Manager at an English center in Ho Chi Minh City, leading a sales team of nine young women. They were hardworking and committed, but like most sales teams, they also faced demanding monthly targets.

It was the end of the month, the peak of our stress cycle. With just two days left, we were still 15 sales short of our target. My own manager called with a directive that every middle manager recognizes: *"Push the team. You only have two days left."*

After hanging up, I stepped out of my office and looked at my team. They weren't relaxing; they were already intensely focused—calling clients, updating lists, and working through lunch. I felt the "middle manager squeeze", the pressure from above to deliver, and the empathy for my team below. I asked myself: *Do they really need me to add my stress to theirs?*

Instead of echoing my manager's demands, I decided to provide **Sponsorship**. I shifted my role from "overseer" to "path-clearer" through three specific actions:

- 01 Emotional Safety**
 I walked over and asked, *"How can I support you right now?"* and *"Would you like to talk?"* This signaled that I was an ally, not a judge.
- 02 Removing Friction**
 I handled the small things, preparing tea breaks and assisting with administrative blockers - so they could stay in their "flow" without distraction.
- 03 Value Realization**
 I helped them calculate their potential incentives. By showing them how much they would earn by closing two more sales, I reframed the goal from, "company quota" to "personal win."

That night, around 10 p.m., we finally reached our target. My Senior Program Advisor later asked why I trusted the team so much. My answer was simple: *"I know who you are and what you are capable of. My job is to help you see your own strengths. Once you see them, you will push yourself further than anyone else can."*





Key Insights for Middle Managers

As middle managers, we are often the "filters" of an organization. If we simply pass pressure down, we create burnout. If we filter that pressure and turn it into sponsorship, we create resilience.

- ◆ **Trust is a Gift, not a Reward:** Don't wait for your team to prove they can handle the pressure before you trust them. Give the trust first; it is the foundation that allows them to perform.
- ◆ **The Pressure Paradox:** When people are stressed, their "peripheral vision" for problem-solving narrows. Adding more pressure makes them less creative. Calm support restores their ability to think clearly.

In the book **The Five Dysfunctions of a Team**, Patrick Lencioni identifies that trust is the foundation of a high-performing team. He writes: *"If you could get all the people in an organization rowing in the same direction, you could dominate any industry, in any market, against any competition, at any time."*

In stressful moments, teams need a **Sponsor** – someone who trusts their capability and provides the right support at the right time.

Key Insights for Staff

- ◆ **The Power of Transparency:** When you are in a crunch, tell your leader what specifically is blocking you. A "Sponsor" can't remove an obstacle they can't see.
- ◆ **Own Your Motivation:** Aligning your personal goals with the team's targets makes the high-pressure cycle feel like a rewarding challenge rather than an exhausting chore.

Reflection for today

What is one obstacle you can remove for your team (or your colleague) right now?



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References:
• Lencioni, P. (2002). The five dysfunctions of a team: A leadership fable (?).