



AMERICAN SOFTWARE TESTING QUALIFICATIONS BOARD

Leading the Way — Why Test Team Leaders Need to be Certified With Their Team

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Learn how ISTQB Software Testing Certification can improve test teams through stronger leadership.



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Introduction

During an ISTQB training course at one of my clients, one of the class members expressed her concern about what would happen if not everyone in the class passed the challenging Advanced Technical Test Analyst exam. The test leader, who was also part of the class, had what I think was a perfect response. She replied, “We will all pass this exam as a team.” The test manager’s tone was not threatening, but rather, was supportive and showed her assurance that “no tester would be left behind.”

As it turned out, everyone in the class did pass the exam, which is a great accomplishment.

Unfortunately, not all classes I have taught have this kind of leadership involvement. What I have to say in this article can apply to any training, but it applies especially to tester certification training.

I want to emphasize at the outset that I fully understand and sympathize with the time pressures and work demands of a test leader. I know that most days it’s hard to get anything productive done because of back-to-back meetings punctuated with the crisis of the day. I have lived that experience.

In other test-related activities, I also get push back from some test leaders and managers that indicate priorities may be out of place. One example is in test metrics and reporting. I am a strong believer in dashboards because they convey data from testing that is hard to convey just in reports. However, I’ve had more than a few test leaders say, “I don’t have time for creating metrics or dashboards.” My response is often along the lines of, “Well, that’s too bad because it’s part of your job.” I know - tough love.

Back to the topic of today, which is the test leader’s involvement in training their team. All too often, I see

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cases where the test team is expected or required to participate in test certification training (or other types of training), but the manager is not part of the training except to schedule it. I understand there are cases where the manager has given up their seat to allow another team member to attend - and that is being a selfless leader, which is admirable. But I have to ask why an organization that invests a significant amount in a training event can't afford the extra seat? Ideally, there should be some flexibility to allow everyone on the team to be part of the training event.

The larger issue is when a test leader doesn't think they need the same training as the team. A common comment I have heard over the years from students in many training contexts is, "I wish our management was here to hear this!" In my experience, there is a clear difference when the test leader is in the classroom, sitting with the rest of the team. Most of the time the difference is positive. However, sometimes management's presence in training can intimidate the team. I'll deal with that situation later in this article.

Here are my top reasons why a test leader needs to also lead the way by training with their team.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Randy Rice is a leading author, speaker, trainer and consultant in the field of software testing and software quality. He has over 30 years experience building and testing mission-critical projects in a variety of environments and has authored over 60 training courses in software testing and software engineering. Randy serves on the board of directors of the American Software Testing Qualifications Board (ASTQB). He is co-author with William E. Perry of the book, *Surviving the Top Ten Challenges of Software Testing and Testing Dirty Systems*. Randy can be reached at www.riceconsulting.com.

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Reason #1

A Good Leader Doesn't Require People to Do What They Wouldn't Do First Themselves

This is what good leadership is all about - going ahead of the team and showing leadership by example. In some cases, a test leader may attend public training or take an e-learning course to experience it, then schedule a class for their team. That also sends a message to the team that their leader has gone before them.

The opposite side of this is that when people are required to do something their leader isn't willing to do, it erodes the motivation of the team.

Jack Welch is noted for saying "Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others." In other words, you can't grow people where you haven't been yourself. I've known test team leaders who learned to code because their team also needed to learn that skill for test automation. That's authentic leadership.

Reason #2

It Builds the Credibility of the Leader

One of the big benefits of test certification training is that it gets people on the same level of understanding concerning testing. I see people with all levels of experience and knowledge in the classes I teach. I make sure that people understand that the training does not devalue their experience in the least. This holds true for test team leaders as well. Attending training with

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your team, or ahead of your team, doesn't diminish your credibility. Rather, it builds it.

Some test leaders express the fear that they might not pass the exam and that would make them look bad. It is true that passing the exam is not guaranteed. However, people value transparency and realism in their leaders. Leaders take risks and sometimes fail. That's OK. Remember the story from the introduction and commit to get certified as a team. That means doing what it takes to get to 100%. Retaking the exam is an option that can be conducted electronically through any Kryterion exam center. Exam retakes are not discounted, but when compared to the value of team success, success is much more valuable than the cost of exams.

Reason #3

The Leader Can Show Confidence to The Team During the Class

Certification training is a bit different from other forms of training because there is a test involved. This adds a degree of stress and often causes people to focus on the exam as opposed to learning the concepts being taught. Some people may worry what will happen if they don't pass the exam. That's human nature. However, the value of the training is in the information conveyed in the course and how it can help testers perform their jobs. The exam is just a way to measure comprehension, recalling facts, and the ability to perform certain tasks.

Keep in mind that in other forms of training, there is not a rigorous exam following the training event. So, the pressure is off and people are more at ease.

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Another factor concerning exams is that some people haven't taken an exam since college or other schooling. Taking an exam may be not be a new experience for someone, but just one that hasn't been experienced for awhile.

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Finally, there are those people who just don't do well on exams. They know the material, but experience "test anxiety" and choke on the exam. I can personally relate to that. There is a book called "Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal About Getting It Right When You Have To" by Sian Bellock that deals in length as to what happens in our brain to cause this. I highly recommend this book if you have exam anxiety.

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In all of these situations, the test leader in the room can provide support to the class and to individuals to give them confidence they can succeed. People need to know they are not in this effort alone.

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Reason #4

The Leader Needs to Know What is Being Taught So It Can Be Applied in the Organization

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A question that most people form in their mind during or after training is, "What do I do with this information?" Sure, people are concerned about, "Will I pass the exam?" but the larger and more important question is how the organization will realize the value of the training in the application of concepts.

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The realization of the value in training and certification comes in knowing how to integrate concepts from the training into daily methods and processes. This is not the tester's job, but management's responsibility.

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How can management understand and apply the concepts taught in a training class if they are not in the class? There are many nuances to testing and training only conveys the knowledge. Application is up to the organization and must have buy-in from both management and testers. External expert guidance is often needed to be successful.

Reason #5

Leaders Show They Believe in the Training

One thing I have learned in over 25 years of training is that if people don't see leadership committed to something, they will likely not be committed either. If testers are required to dedicate three to five days for a single training course, they are juggling tasks also. Testers need to know why they are in the class. Only the test leader can convey the motivation. It's best if they convey the "why," then take a seat in the class.

Reason #6

Leaders Can Answer Organization-specific Questions Posed by Testers

It is highly unlikely the trainer will know enough about your organizational strategies and plans to answer questions a tester may ask during the session. This is actually one of the great value-added points of training in that there is the opportunity for team bonding and discussion. There will be differences between what is taught in an ISTQB training class (or most training courses) and what is currently practiced in an organization.

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This “contextual understanding” is critical to enable people to connect the concepts covered in training to the practices performed in the organization. The leader can help bridge concepts from training to those currently used in the organization as no one else can.

On the negative side, if the leader is not present in the class to hear and experience the nuances of terminology and practice, there will be a lack of awareness that cannot be totally overcome simply by reading a syllabus or training material.

Reason #7

Leaders Should Hear What Their Team Members Have to Say

There are many challenges in software testing. I think I wrote a book about those challenges once upon a time.

It’s a good thing for people to feel free enough to share their challenges and frustrations concerning software testing and other topics. Not that the challenges will be solved quickly or easily, but it’s good to have the issues out in the open for discussion.

On this point, some might well make the case that having leaders in the room will cause people to shut down and not ask questions or make comments out of fear of looking foolish. I totally recognize this situation exists, and it’s the sign of a fearful culture. Unfortunately, fear-driven and blaming cultures are common, and also horrible work environments. It is not a quick or easy change to transform a culture from fear to freedom. In fact, my observation is that

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fear exists from the very top of the organization. That makes this kind of culture especially difficult to change.

As an instructor, I can tell within minutes if I'm dealing with a group that is shut down due to fear. If the test leader is in the class, I often try to facilitate constructive conversations and provide ways for people to ask questions in ways that are not intimidating. I can't claim that I've transformed a team culture in three days, but I can say I've been able to get the class to loosen up, relax, and speak up - with the test leader in the class. That all adds up to a great learning experience.

Reason #8

It Allows the Leader to Personally Experience and Evaluate the Quality of the Training Experience

Only so much can be learned from post-class evaluations and discussions. Imagine three to five days of training being boiled down to a one-page subjective evaluation completed in five minutes at the very end of the training course. There is just too much context and experience missed in that form of evaluation. Numbers and comments are obtained, but that information often fails to capture the full knowledge of the training experience.

When the test leader is in the class, they see how the instructor explains concepts, answers questions and deals with students in general. The leader can also give real-time feedback to the instructor about needs the class may have such as how the team may be performing during exercises, places where additional emphasis may be needed and so forth.

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A reality in tester certification training is that passing the exam is not guaranteed, so some people may not pass the exam. In some cases, the failure rate of the class can be higher than expected due to a number of factors. It really helps to understand how a less than desired outcome may have occurred if the test leader was also in the class to witness the level of instruction and the motivation level of the class. Then, if the leader also takes the exam, they can also evaluate the ease or difficulty of the exam to give a full picture of the training and exam experience.

Reason #9

The Leader Shows an Example of Being a Life-long Learner

Being a life-long learner is one the points in the ISTQB Code of Ethics. Learning starts in the classroom but doesn't end there. It takes continual application and practice of the knowledge gained in the class to see actual skills gained and implemented as procedural actions in the organization. It takes a strong leader to take knowledge and transform that knowledge into practice. This effort extends long after the class has ended and an exam has been taken.

I have seen great examples of test leaders who went on to obtain higher levels of test certification on their own initiative for their career and also as an example to the team.

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Summary

One of my favorite leadership quotes comes from John Maxwell - "A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way." The takeaway from that quote is that a good leader will be engaged with the team in everything they do. Otherwise, the leader is detached from the team and soon loses touch with what the team is experiencing.

The practice of a test team leader being with the team extends to training and certification. By being an active participant in training and certification along with the team, a test team leader builds their bonding and credibility with the team. In leadership, presence is powerful. Whether a test team leader is present during a test session, an important meeting, or a certification training class, the same "presence principle" applies.

One of the test team leaders that reviewed a draft of this commented that in a company he worked in, there was a leadership thought often stated that said, "A Leader Casts a Shadow - What Kind of Shadow Will You Cast?" I think this is an important for all leaders to remember. The people we lead are looking not only at us directly, but at the things we influence. We want that influence to be positive and engaged. When people look back on how we have influenced their career growth, they should see someone who was active, concerned and engaged in their times of growth.

In that way, everyone on the team grows and wins.

Post script - I would like to thank the test leaders who took the time to read, review and comment on this article - Cynthia Adkins, Mark Bentsen and David Potts.

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