IF YOU BUILD IT

… Will they Come?
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Architect Soft Skills: Part II, Leadership

Solutions architects are the "technical managers" of projects. This means they are responsible that all the designs and code is aligned to the functional requirements and that the quality attributes are kept.

However, architects are seldom the direct managers of a development team (and even if the architect is the manager, you still need to inspire your workers. And tyranny? Well, that just doesn't work). You might think that establishing yourself as a technical authority will be enough (that's why they made you the architect in the first place, right?) but it isn't. You need to cultivate your leadership skills as well.

What is leadership anyway? Leadership is about exerting influence on people and thus increase the chance that people will follow your vision and decisions. To do that you need to gain the respect of the teams you work with, communicate your vision and designs clearly and be trustworthy.

So how do you do that? I don't have a definitive answer to that but here are a few things to think about which I think are useful:

- Provide direction. To lead you need to know where you are going and make the decisions that will get you there.
- Explain your decisions. Deus ex machina doesn't count. You work with intelligent people, they may not have your experience or the same depth of knowledge but they want to know why they are doing something.
- Listen to what others have to say. They may actually say something valuable you know :)
- Don't postpone decisions and don't avoid conflict. This will not make them go away. Do try to manage your conflict though.
- Motivate people. This can be done by things like mentoring and teaching, allowing people design freedom. (Letting others make the decisions in their relative fields/areas even if the solution they propose is not perfect.)
- Set an example. For example, you can sit (pair with) other developers in the team to design/code important things together. (This is probably where the views on architect must code, code comes from.)

Leadership is only one of the soft skills that architects need, but it is one of the most important. As I mentioned earlier, architects are usually not the managers but they do need to lead if they want to ensure the stakeholders needs (the system quality attributes) will indeed make it into the solution.

Lastly, I don't know about a lot of courses that address the architect leadership skills; in fact I only know of one. Dana Bredemeyer has a three-day workshop on the architect's role which includes leadership training. However, considering it is so important I think there should be more.