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## VERBAL LEADERSHIP

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*“I can say through 40 years of NFL experience that leadership comes in a lot of shapes and sizes. I’ve had players who were very vocal that were great leaders. I’ve had players who were vocal that weren’t great leaders. It’s not about volume or who’s the most talkative guy. It’s the guy who does his job and puts the best interest of the team and organization in the lead.”*

**– Bill Belichick**

*“What you do is what you believe. Everything else is just talk.”*

**– Denny Lehman**

*“You have to hold people accountable. You’re not always going to be the most popular. If you want to win, sometimes you have to have a difficult conversation with people. You know they are not going to like you. But you do it because you want what is best for the team.”*

**– Carla Overbeck**

*“Wise men speak because they have something to say; Fools speak because they have to say something.”*

**– Plato**

*“On good teams, coaches hold players accountable. On great teams, players hold each other accountable.”*

**– Joe Dumars**

One of the most common leadership myths is that some leaders are vocal and some lead by example. Remember that leadership is about influence. All student-athletes are people of influence through both their actions and their words. You can't just tell people what to do and expect to be a verbal leader without being a leader by example.

Words without the action to back them up are hollow at best and hypocritical at worst. The main misconception related to this deals with players that say that they are not verbal leaders. This is simply not true. If you can talk, you can lead verbally. Players talk all day long. Players have influence all day long. What is true is that you might not be a rah-rah, intense verbal leader like a Ray Lewis, Tim Tebow or LeBron James. You don't have to be loud and vocal unless you have a position of leadership or you are the most logical person to say what needs to be said at that particular time.

However, every player should be leading verbally. You should always be providing a kind word of encouragement. You should always be sticking up for wrong on the team (e.g. when a teammate is picking on another teammate) if you have a relationship with that person. Speaking of that, if you do not have a strong connection of trust with a teammate then your verbal influence will be limited. For instance, if a teammate is slacking and you point it out publicly without that strong connection then it could actually do more harm than good. When you confront someone or try to hold a teammate accountable, you must have some trust built up. There must be a relationship that exists where that person will have a reason to listen to you.

If this is the case, you are probably close to a teammate that is close to that person. You might be able to talk with the other teammate about the situation and influence them to step up as a verbal leader behind the scenes. Your goal should be to maintain unity on the team and keep all the players moving forward toward your common objective. If a player feels that you are embarrassing them in front of others, it will create additional challenges for your team.

Teammates need to know that you care about them and that they can trust you. You must choose your words carefully and the appropriate timing. Most leadership happens behind closed doors in much smaller settings. Most influence occurs where a connection has been made. The great generals Robert E. Lee and Napoleon were known for asking their

soldiers about their families and knowing them personally before going into battle. They were successful on the battlefield, not only because of their military prowess but because they connected with their men.

The type of motivation that you see in movies like *Braveheart* and the *Gladiator* is rare. The rah-rah fired up speeches are a short-term inspiration. Long-lasting influence is when people know, like and trust you. When a relationship is present then successful verbal influence can take place. Having a friendship or building a connection sometimes takes work. It is an intentional act by you to value another person. Here are a few ideas on how to connect with others more effectively:

1. Don't be afraid to apologize first.
2. Do a favor for them without expecting anything in return.
3. Give a gift for no reason.
4. A hand-written note of encouragement or thanks.
5. Take them out for coffee/lunch and make it about them (ask questions).
6. Be encouraging and supportive.
7. Be respectfully honest (accountability)
8. Have their well-being in mind.
9. Only give the unsolicited advice if it is absolutely necessary (detrimental to them, someone else or the team).
10. Don't be petty. Likewise, don't get offended by stupid petty stuff.

## **TIM TEBOW**

In 2008, the University of Florida football team was undefeated and ranked #4 nationally. They were playing at home against Ole Miss, who was unranked and 2-2. In a huge upset, Ole Miss defeated the Gators 31-30. After the game, Heisman Trophy winner and Florida quarterback Tim Tebow took to the podium and, not only apologized for his performance but also made a promise that would become legendary. The Gators proceeded to win 10 games in a row, including a 24-14 win against Oklahoma in the National Championship game. Here are Tebow's words from that Ole Miss press conference, which has become known simply as "The Promise",

“To the fans and everybody in Gator Nation, I’m sorry. I’m extremely sorry. We were hoping for an undefeated season. That was my goal, something Florida has never done here. I promise you one thing, a lot of good will come out of this. You will never see any player in the entire country play as hard as I will play the rest of the season. You will never see someone push the rest of the team as hard as I will push everybody the rest of the season. You will never see a team play harder than we will the rest of the season. God Bless.”

The very next year, coach Urban Meyer put up a plaque outside the Florida football complex so that all visiting fans and all players entering can see the facility would be reminded of this leadership by Tebow and the accomplishment of the team. Certainly, this is an extreme case of verbal leadership. Not everyone is able to say these things and fewer still are able to back it up. But Tebow took that opportunity to motivate his teammates – and himself!

Once he said this stuff publicly, then he had to back it up both in his play and the way that he added value to his teammates. Football is the ultimate team sport. As good as Tebow was, he knew that he needed his teammates to perform at a high level to achieve their championship goals. In order to back up his words, he had to encourage and influence his teammates to perform at their highest level.

## **ACCOUNTABILITY**

In Patrick Lencioni’s best-selling book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Dysfunction #4 is Avoidance of Accountability. This is important because a team that avoids accountability with one another creates resentment among team members who have different standards of performance. It can also encourage mediocrity, which means you are the best of the bad. With mediocrity, you are as close to the bottom as you are the top. The other key problem with no accountability with team members is that it places an undue burden on the team leader (normally the coach or captain) as the sole source of discipline.

The most successful teams – those with championship cultures – have team members that are willing to hold each other accountable in the appropriate ways. Accountability works both ways. Players have to be

willing to confront in a positive way, but other players have to be coachable, willing to listen and make the appropriate changes. Your coaches can't be the only ones holding players accountable. If this is happening, then your coaches are going to get worn out and not be as sharp with preparing your team for games and practices.

Secondly, they are not in the dorm rooms, car rides to and from practice, cafeteria, or locker rooms with you. They don't know everything that is going on. If the off-court standards are not being handled by team members then they may not be handled at all and will turn into major issues that derail your team from achieving its' goals.

### **WHAT SHOULD I SAY TO MY TEAMMATES?**

There are two occasions when you will talk with your teammates – normal friend talk and sport-related talk. Most players know how to talk with their friends. The sport-related talk is a little trickier, but it still comes back to the common fundamentals of communication of respect, trust, honesty, and tact. Here are 3 situations in which you would be verbal with teammates in a sport-related manner...

**Encouraging** – You should always be looking for ways to encourage your teammates. This could be in the form of reminding them of something like “Next Play”. This is a phrase that Duke basketball and Coach K made famous that serves as a reminder that they can move on even if they just messed up. You can refocus your teammate with an encouraging word. You can provide energy and inspire the team like the example of Monmouth's bench in chapter 6. Your encouraging words can be in private or public. Both are useful. When you do it publicly, other players may catch on. Enthusiasm is contagious.

**Informative** – This might be reminding base runners what the situation is in softball (e.g. “two outs, running on anything”) or football players relaying the play in a huddle. It might be letting your teammates know that coach just changed up plans and you will be meeting in the weight room first before practice. It could be reminding two of

your teammates that all three of you have bus cleanup duty when you get back to school. Anyone can pass on accurate information in an appropriate manner. During a game or practice, you might yell “help side” or “watch the linebacker” or “shooter in the corner” – things that help your teammates.

**Accountability** – Holding your teammates accountable is typically the toughest type of verbal leadership but it can be the most crucial. Allowing behaviors to go unchecked or standards to be unmet, is the quickest way to develop a losing culture. It is best to confront people that you have a good relationship with and do it in an appropriate way. For instance, calling out someone in front of the team should probably be reserved as a last resort. Sometimes, an encouraging reminder can proactively minimize the need for confrontation later (e.g. “Come on guys, we got this sprint. Let’s all make our time and we will be done. It’s just like the last defensive possession of a game. Let’s win this game.”)

## **MAYA MOORE**

Maya Moore is one of the most decorated basketball players of all-time. She was a two-time college player of the year while a member of the UCONN dynasty. In the WNBA, she has led the Minnesota Lynx to championships in 2011, 2013 and 2015 after entering the league as a rookie in 2011. She is extremely well-respected.

Moore understands her responsibility as a star player but she used to be a quiet leader. Moore once said,

“I want to be a shining light and bring life to every situation.”

Phil Ervin wrote an article for *Fox Sports* that talked about Moore understanding the need for her to be more vocal and here are a few excerpts from that,

"The way she sets an example on the floor is one thing, and then she's always talking to you," said Tricia Liston, the 12th overall pick in the April 14 draft. "She's trying to help you. She's telling you 'do this, do that.' If you mess up a little bit, she's gonna tell you how to do it the best way."

..."The very first time we circled up (after practice) with this group, Maya had tremendous things to offer," Lynx coach Cheryl Reeve said. "It's just been nonstop since then, that she just really, really understands the value of her words."

...Said Maya Moore: "It's definitely an opportunity for me to step up and just do the things that I've been taught to do growing up . . . just constantly being someone who is vocally engaged."

..."She's always going 100 percent," Liston said. "Yesterday in a drill that I don't even know if we were going 100 percent, she's diving on the floor trying to get her stops."

Moore wasn't always a verbal leader, but she is learning to be. It is never too late to become a better leader. Sometimes that means stepping up your game in an area that isn't as comfortable. Just like you sometimes have to work extra hard on developing a skill (e.g. dribbling with your left hand), you also have to develop another area of your leadership game.

## **CHICAGO BULLS**

Talented teams can self-destruct when they cannot lead themselves. A lack of leadership with a team derails more teams than a lack of talent. Most teams have players that can play. The best teams have players that can positively lead.

In 2016, the Chicago Bulls had high hopes with the acquisitions of future Hall of Famer Dwyane Wade and Rajon Rondo, who led the NBA in assists the previous year. These two were supposed to join up with rising superstar Jimmy Butler. Instead, a lack of leadership derailed the team's potential. Sure, they made the playoffs as the last seed and with a 41-41 record. This was a far cry from what they were expecting with a talented roster.

Butler and Wade, the team's top two scorers were fined by the team for making comments. A portion of Wade's comments included the following,

"I'm 35 years old, man. I've got three championships. It shouldn't hurt me more than it hurts these young guys. They have to want it. ... It has to change. It has to hurt inside to lose games like this."

Butler then echoed Wade's remarks, saying:

"(Expletive teammates) just got to care if we win or lose. At the end of the day, do whatever it takes to help the team win. You play your role to the T. Be a star in your role, man."

I can't speak to whether they were right in their assessment about their teammates but I do know that leadership begins with each individual. Did they do all that they could do? They are the two stars of the team. As Gandhi said, "be the change that you want to see in the world." Did they provide positive guidance to their other teammates? Did they provide a positive example? Were they showing the way to the other Bulls and helping them maximize their potential or were they just relying on their status and past successes as the reason people should follow them?

Evidently, there was some animosity toward Butler and Wade from other players on the team because the veteran Rondo, the team's leader in assists took to Instagram to voice his opinion of the team's two stars and compared them to his former World Championship teammates during his Boston Celtic days,

"My vets would never go to the media. They would come to the team. My vets didn't pick and choose when they wanted to bring it. They brought it every time they stepped in the gym whether it was practice or a game. They didn't take days off. My vets didn't care about their numbers. My vets played for the team. When we lost, they wouldn't blame us. They took responsibility and got in the gym. They showed the



young guys what it meant to work. Even in Boston when we had the best record in the league, if we lost a game, you could hear a pin drop on the bus. They showed us the seriousness of the game. My vets didn't have an influence on the coaching staff. They couldn't change the plan because it didn't work for them. I played under one of the greatest coaches, and he held everyone accountable. It takes 1-15 to win. When you isolate everyone, you can't win consistently. I may be a lot of things, but I'm not a bad teammate. My goal is to pass what I learned along. The young guys work. They show up. They don't deserve blame. If anything is questionable, it's the leadership."

Wow, shots fired! Rondo probably had a point, but this should not have been aired publicly. This should have happened behind closed doors. More importantly, Rondo completely missed the point of what he is saying.

He was a veteran on the team and was not doing what he said his veterans should have been doing. When he said that his vets would never go to the media, I guess he didn't consider Instagram as a media outlet. I guess when he said that he wasn't a bad teammate, he was overlooking the fact that he was criticizing other teammates publicly – no matter how justified. If his goal was to truly pass along what he had learned, then what exactly was he passing along? It was not okay to act that way.

I am guessing that none of the Bulls have read Tobias Fredberg's article in *The Harvard Business Review* entitled "Why Good Leaders Pass the Cred and Take the Blame" in which he says,

"They [leaders] see the willingness to accept personal responsibility — especially during tough times — as critical to winning the trust of employees and other stakeholders. Leaders, in their view, need the endurance and stamina to lead their organizations through thick and thin. They also need to contain the anxiety of their employees. A leader who spreads the blame, who fails to accept that he or she is ultimately the one in charge, increases the insecurity of their people and lessens the likelihood that they'll take ownership of initiatives."

So, what was the takeaway from this incident? Good leaders help make others better. They don't point out flaws in public.

Good leaders are not hypocrites. You can't take a stand saying that someone else is being a bad leader while demonstrating that very same behavior.

Good leaders earn respect daily. The best way to earn respect is to be trusted. The best way to be trusted is to build a connection with others. This does not happen if you are tearing them down publicly.

Good leaders are not concerned about their egos or getting their own way or their stats or how they look in the media. Good leaders care about their teammates.

Good leaders recognize that it is a team effort. Jimmy Butler said the players need to be stars in their roles. Butler, Wade, and Rondo needed to heed this advice. Their roles extended far beyond scoring or passing. As leaders, their role was to know the way, show the way and go the way. They might have filled up the stat sheet but their lack of leadership led the Bulls to a .500 record and being bounced in the first round of the NBA playoffs.