

The Vital Role of the Coach as a Leadership Educator

"In the eyes of most observers, my title is 'Coach' Wooden, but this is not what I would list first on my resume or business card. From my earliest years I have viewed my primary job as one of educating others: I am a teacher." -John Wooden

It cannot be overstated that leadership is a complex and often bewildering experience. To teach leadership is oftentimes equally elusive. To be a leadership educator you have to be *willing and able* to see the leadership and influence opportunities you might have missed before. You can start by recognizing that your athletes need guidance in developing their capacity for leading themselves, leading others, and leading with others.

Coaching for Leadership begins with you taking a bold stand on transforming your team building process. Building a high performing team is possible only with commitment from you, your staff, and your student-athletes. Team building is an extraordinary partnership. ***Coaching for Leadership is an iterative activity, an ongoing venture of co-creating opportunities for student-athletes to practice leadership.***

Coaching for Leadership places relationships in the center of teamwork; the linchpin to high performance is how the student-athletes work together—both *on and off* the playing field. How often do you find yourself thinking that relationships are “nice to have?” And when interpersonal conflict occurs, you simply dismiss it as normal operational behavior—which it is but what matters is how it’s handled and resolved. Many coaches give lip service to relationships. *Coaching for leadership* rests on the principle of not leaving relationships to chance. Consider what might happen if you are totally committed to coaching for leadership.

It’s important to note, however, that much of what passes as leadership today is nothing more than manipulation of people by sticks and carrots – threats and rewards. That’s not effective leadership for the long-term and certainly is limited as a method of teaching leadership. True leadership seeks to motivate people by an appeal to the head and the heart, not by the demand of command and control. Compliance seldom, if ever, leads to authentic commitment. And loyalty is not something you can demand—it is something your student-athletes grant to you when they know you’ve got their best interest at heart.

As a leadership educator your main task is to create a psychologically safe environment in which your players want to learn how to become team leaders. This is not a trivial distinction. A learning climate characterized by trust and openness is critical to encourage young people to respect and appreciate their teammates and the learning process. The learning situation which is most effective is one that is, purposeful, planned, and productive. The following seven conditions are helpful in creating a psychologically safe learning environment, favorable to an experiential approach to leadership development.

1. Student-athletes need to feel comfortable with the concepts of leadership.
2. Student-athletes need to know about the practice and the processes of leadership.
3. Student-athletes need permission to make mistakes.
4. Student-athletes should have a sense of purpose as it relates to leadership. They need to have an answer to the question “Why lead?”

5. Student-athletes should begin to develop an awareness of their individual strengths and weaknesses as leaders. They need feedback.
6. Student-athletes need to monitor and adjust behaviors intended to influence others. They need to take the appropriate action from feedback.
7. Student-athletes should begin to learn the complex practice of self-reflection.

The importance of team leaders and team leadership has a long tradition in sports. Student-athletics is often mentally complex, physically demanding, and an intensely emotional experience. When a team's members work together great things happen. But when they work at cross-purposes adversity is right around the corner. The results of my research over the last decade have been clear. We can develop the leaders our teams and our society needs, and I believe everyone who aspires to lead or train to lead can learn from leading in the sport setting.

The first step in tackling any leadership challenge is self-awareness. Take a hard look at yourself. Examine your experience and results working with student-athletes. If you find yourself "searching" for leaders year-after-year, it's a good bet you're not yet a leadership educator. *Coaching for Leadership* helps solve this chronic issue.

Do you have a formal philosophy of teaching leadership and teambuilding? This is an important question for any coach to ponder. How will your style work when teaching these two pillars of student development? Your student-athletes should be the beneficiaries of your teaching and leadership, and how you model the role of a leader will impact their growth and development. The challenge for most coaches, then, is learning how to become an effective teacher of leadership. It's likely you'll have to learn skills such as the patience to tolerate mistakes, to trust others, to empower your players, and understanding when to raise or lower expectations to meet the capabilities of each individual.