

Benefits of Leadership Development in Sport

Mike Voight, Central Connecticut State University

Many athletic administrators and sport coaches have told me over the years it is easier to see effective leadership than to explain it, yet the real challenge is in developing good and effective leadership. In this brief article I outline some fundamental benefits of enhancing team leaders and general principles to develop it.

“Leadership is the most observed, yet least understood, phenomena on earth.” - James McGregor Burns, father of modern leadership practices

Defining Leadership

The task of verbally defining such a grandiose concept is no easy feat, as researchers and thought leaders have argued for years about it. Many of these definitions use words such as “position,” “power,” “influence,” “change agent,” “visionary,” “commanding” and “guidance.” Dr. Steven Sample, former President of the University of Southern California, simply defines a leader as “someone who has identifiable followers” (Sample, 2002). Another definition comes from Harvey Dorfman, a Major League Baseball sport psychology consultant, who writes, “The position of authority identifies the leadership role. The degree to which one appropriately influences others identifies the leader” (Dorfman, 2003). I also tend to agree with Michael Useem, director of the Wharton School Center for Leadership and Change in Pennsylvania and author of “The Leadership Moment,” when he says, “A precise definition is not essential here; indeed, it may be impossible to arrive at one. But I take leadership to signify the act of making a difference” (Useem, 1999).

So if leadership is about holding a position of authority from which a difference can be made in the personal and professional lives of others, what are the additional benefits to leadership development in sport?

“The single most important ingredient after you get the talent is internal leadership.” - Coach Mike Krzyzewski (Janssen and Dale, 2002)

Valuing Leadership in Sport

One of the most successful women coaches across all sports, Pat Summitt, who led her Tennessee basketball team to six national championships, believed her job as coach was to help develop leaders. “More than winning, I believe our job as coaches is to develop our players into responsible leaders. Sure we teach them how to be better athletes. But that’s not all I want to be known for. I want the young women who come into our program to be better people and better leaders by the time they leave” (Janssen, 2003). It is about time leadership is being valued for its own sake. There are simply too many examples of bad leaders in our society, even in the world of youth, scholastic, collegiate,



international and professional sport. This is a primary driver for the importance of leadership development for sport participants.

According to social scientists and generational experts, today’s generation of young people is deficient in crucial leadership skills, despite their many documented strengths. These strengths include how savvy they are with all types of technology, how connected they are with each other through social media, how they embrace diversity and multi-tasking, and how goal-directed and confident they are, along with their desire for group and teamwork. Areas of deficiency include having little experience dealing with adversity and struggle (a result of being overprotected), lacking patience due to the instant gratification of technology and communication, succumbing to the pressure to excel to meet high expectations through cheating and working the system to get one’s way, seeking exorbitant amounts of performance feedback, and despite social media influences are not the more effective communicators. Beliefs such as this highlight the importance and value given to leadership skills and leadership development for sport. Jeff Janssen, who provides leadership programming for high school and college programs, lists seven benefits effective leaders provide their sport teams. Good captains ensure high standards and a strong work ethic, help the team handle adversity, build better team chemistry, help the coach obtain the pulse of the team, minimize and manage conflict, help in recruiting, and are the best insurance against stupid acts conducted by teammates (Ibid). Additional benefits I have seen via my educational leadership consultations can be seen in Table 1 (Voight, 2012).

Table 1 - Benefits of Sport Team Leadership

Context	Responsibilities
<i>Team organization</i>	with how busy teams are these days, captains keep the team altered to the schedule commitments and changes to it.
<i>Team connections</i>	Captains are responsible for connecting with their teammates on a daily basis to ensure each teammate feels a part of the program.
<i>Locker room climate</i>	Captains try to keep the locker room talk and banter productive and motivating, win or lose.
<i>Practice leader</i>	Captains keep the practice climate productive, energetic, and efficient.
<i>Go-to’s</i>	Captains always want the ball with the game on the line and will make the plays that need to be made.
<i>Lead by example</i>	Captains are first to speak in team meetings, first to go in a drill, and know the system and plays.
<i>Competitive</i>	Captains are responsible for setting the competitive tone by getting the most out of every rep, drill, practice, and game opportunity.
<i>Challenge teammates</i>	Ensuring their teammates follow the competitive tone set.
<i>Improved teammate play</i>	Captains help reinforce coach teachings and strategy instruction while helping their teammates make adjustments during game play.



<i>Improved team play</i>	In most sports, play on the field is dictated more by the players (adjusting and decision making) than by the coaches, and the captains are the “coaches” on the field or court of play.
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Additional reasons for increased attention and efforts for leadership development initiatives in sport include the notion that good coaches and sport leaders look to maximize all factors which could influence productivity, thus, improving individual and team leadership can greatly improve a team’s chances of succeeding. Moreover, an understanding of the newest of generations, the millennials, reveals they are in need of improved leadership and followership skills to overcome their alleged shortcomings as a generation is needed. Appreciating leadership for its own sake is a very important first step for administrators, coaches, players, and teams to make, followed by knowing and defining what leadership is and the many processes involved in improving individual, team, and organizational leadership.

“The ingredients of leadership cannot be taught, however. They must be learned.” - Warren Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader* (2009)

Leadership Development in Sport

The primary goals of the leadership development process are to mobilize the individual and collective processes to assist the team in accomplishing their ultimate goals (e.g., winning conference and national championships), while improving team functioning, communication, connections, and overall effectiveness. Subsequent goals include improving upon individual leadership and followership skills of its members and orienting the up-and-coming team leaders to the process for the future. How these goals can be met is through a progressive series of stages that comprise more of a process than a program. One example of this is the 6-T process©. This 6-T process represents a compilation of techniques and tactics used by experts in organizational dynamics and leadership development that represent an all-encompassing process rather than a program. Of note is that leadership programs are limiting as they usually consist of random lectures or guest speakers that address leadership skills like communication and leading by example. Daniel Goleman and his esteemed colleagues in the book “Primal Leadership”, use the term “process” when describing the best practices of leadership development: “What many organizations need aren’t just one-time programs but a process built as a holistic system that permeates every layer of the organization” (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002). They continue by stating true change and transformation occur through a multifaceted process permeating three particular levels, namely, individuals, team and the culture of the organization. The 6-T process is an example of this via these six stages: testing, teaching, training, transferring, transforming, and tradition (Voight, 2014).

1. **Testing:** Assessing the presence of leadership talents, techniques, tactics, strengths, and weaknesses, while reflecting on deeper motives and inspirations defining you and the roles you play in your social world. This can be accomplished by self-assessment surveys, 360-degree assessments, peer feedback, and self-reflective exercises and discussions.
2. **Teaching:** The feedback derived from the surveys and open-ended responses represent “teachable moments” which can be further explored and applied to the team leaders’ present positions

and responsibilities. Areas of strengths can be maximized while embracing areas of improvement once identified and addressed through action learning and practice.

3. *Training*: It is in this stage that the formal practice of “doing” leadership occurs daily. Learning on the job has always been valued but when leaders-in-training have a mentor along the way to maximize the learning opportunities, which present themselves daily, then it truly is the most efficacious way to learn and practice good and effective leadership. Consistent dialogue and feedback in this manner is one of the more critical aspects of the leadership process.
4. *Transferring*: The objective of this stage is to transfer leadership strengths and lessons learned from one situation to another, while looking for and learning about other potential solutions and/or methods for problem solving. Another important mission is to assist in transferring what is being learned into other areas of their lives (personal, social, academic, and family lives).
5. *Transforming*: Global objective here is to become more effective at influencing others and maximizing leadership opportunities, not only for personal growth, but also for the greater good of others and the team or organization. The ultimate measure of a leader’s success is the impact they have on growing others. This is accomplished through an integrative process continuously referred to with active reminders and follow-ups.
6. *Traditions*: The ability to imprint leadership traditions into the fabric of the team becomes a priority here, which includes its standards, identity, vision, and daily pursuits, both short and long term. If these have not been created, it signifies an important starting point and project not only for the leaders-in-training but also for the members of the organization and team.

I continue to be an advocate for do-it-yourself leadership development processes over commercialized one-size-fits-all programs. It is possible to create and implement your own do-it-yourself leadership process especially with the knowledge that teams are better served by designing and implementing a personalized leadership process comprised of their own values, philosophies, resources, and their own people. One of the more important aspects of do-it-yourself leadership development is the power of your people. It is the involvement of your own people and your own resources while including them in the process of teaching, mentoring, and modeling key leadership techniques and tactics. Doing it yourself is made easier by using a template like the 6-T process as a blueprint. This allows your team or organization’s values and your own valuable assets, your people, to be incorporated so a richer, inclusive, and authentic leadership development process can flourish. You are limited only by your creativity and vision.

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Portions of this article are from Mike Voight's newest book, The Sports Leadership Playbook (McFarland) and its accompanying workbook, Working the Sport Leadership Playbook, as well as from his upcoming book, Leadership is a Team Sport: A Do-It-Yourself Guide to Developing Impactful and Influential Leaders Throughout Your Sport Team and Organization. Dr. Voight advises with high performing teams, coaches, and athletes on personal and team leadership matters and leadership development processes.

Michael Voight, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor in the Physical Education/Human Performance Department at Central Connecticut State University. He is also a psychology-performance consultant with extensive experience working with collegiate, elite, Olympic, and professional athletes on performance enhancement, team and leadership consulting. He is an editorial board member for the International Journal of Sport Science and Coaching and Annual Review for High Performance Coaches and Consultants, and serves on the review committee for the Journal of Strength and Conditioning. He is the author of four books on mental toughness and has several DVDs and webinars on sport psychology-related topics.