Coaching Leadership: What Approach Works Best?

This edition is inspired by the article written by Stewart Vella and Dana Perlman, published in volume 1, issue 3 of ISCJ.

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Coach leadership is one of the most studied areas of sport coaching. Numerous models of coach leadership have been proposed, and countless others have been adapted from other fields, most notably business and organizational development. Yet, after decades of research and debate, a single ‘optimal’ model of coach leadership remains elusive.

When you listen to the world’s great coaches, common leadership themes are evident, but in the end their leadership styles appear to be as diverse as their personalities. In the world of sport where performance is public and quick results are expected, perhaps the most effective leadership approach can simply be described as ‘pragmatic’. This is how 11-time NBA championship coach Phil Jackson described it in his recent book 11 Rings, stating that he views leadership as “an act of controlled improvisation” (p. 252).

In my experience, I have seen some truth to coach Jackson’s claim, as the most successful coaches make great efforts to adapt their approaches to the unique needs and personalities of the particular athletes and teams they are coaching at the moment. Yet, wouldn’t this athlete-driven ‘improvisation’ simply be an example of an athlete-centered leadership style? Much has been written on athlete-centered coaching, including a wonderful book by the same title authored by Lynn Kidman.

What are the guiding principles, then, of an athlete-centered coach leadership style? The recent article by Stewart Vella and Dana Perlman published in the International Sport Coaching Journal provides some valuable answers to this important question. In their article they review three common approaches to coaching: the mastery approach to coaching, autonomy-supportive coaching, and transformational leadership.

Coaches who adopt a mastery leadership approach focus their efforts on creating a motivational climate that emphasizes effort and learning. Creating an athlete reward program that recognizes work ethic and a commitment to personal improvement is an example of a mastery leadership strategy. Many coaches I know who use this approach also find value in posting these effort and learning goals in the locker room as a constant reminder of the importance of personal mastery.

Coaches who use an autonomy-supportive coaching leadership approach strive to help athletes meet three basic human needs: the need for freedom and control, the need to feel competent and successful, and the need to feel connected to others. Scheduling some ‘free play’ time at the start of a practice for athletes to re-connect and socialize with their teammates is an example of a coaching strategy designed to help athletes meet their basic needs.

The transformational leadership coaching approach is adapted from the business literature and contrasts transformational with transactional leadership. Whereas transactional coaches lead
through coercion and rewards, transformational coaches lead by inspiring others to strive toward a stimulating shared vision. All coaches and athletes want to win; this is not what is meant by a ‘stimulating shared vision’. Transformational coaches are believers; they build confidence in their athletes by showing relentless optimism in their ability to not only reach, but exceed, their potential. They inspire athletes to imagine possibilities instead of limits.

Vella and Perlman conclude that despite some important differences, the three approaches do indeed share some fundamental commonalities. All three leadership approaches emphasize frequent positive reinforcement of athlete constructive behaviors, and careful attention to each athlete’s individual physical, emotional, and psychological needs.

In other words, an effective coach leadership style is one in which coaches recognize and reward athletes when they behave consistently with the team’s core values while also helping athletes meet their own personal needs. This type of leadership approach is athlete-centered on the one hand with the focus on individual needs, while simultaneously emphasizing altruistic behavior and commitment to group goals. This optimal leadership style might best be described as a ‘hybrid’ coach leadership approach, a term I first encountered when reading a clever article on coach leadership by John Hammermeister.

Sir Alex Ferguson, the most successful professional soccer coach of all-time, used the term ‘counterbalance’ to describe this hybrid coach leadership approach. When asked how he successfully coached an eclectic mix of the world’s top athletes from around the world, he explained that you have to respect each individual athlete’s unique personality while ensuring they fit the Manchester United mold. For example, sometimes an athlete may have a volatile personality, but that could be tolerated, or in his words ‘counterbalanced’, if the athlete also respected the Manchester United core values and team ethic.

Returning to the example of championship basketball coach Phil Jackson, he too is a model of the hybrid leadership style advocated in the article by Vella and Perlman. Coach Jackson helped his athletes meet their individual needs by widely distributing power and decision-making while simultaneously setting boundaries to ensure the team as a whole stayed true to their purpose and core values. In fact, coach Jackson once described his primary role as a coach as the “keeper of the team’s vision” (p. 12).

In closing, the coach leadership article by Vella and Perlman provides a compelling and insightful point of departure for reflecting on effective approaches to coach leadership. Thank you for visiting the Editor’s Reflection’s section of the International Sport Coaching Journal. I look forward to sharing more reflections with you soon.

Sincerely,

Dr. Wade Gilbert, PhD
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Featured article:

References

