Athletic Trainers: Leaders in Sports

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The quarterback, in the lime-light... not the athletic therapist. The gymnast, in the limelight... not the athletic therapist. The shooting guard, in the limelight... not the athletic therapist. The field hockey goalie, in the limelight... not the athletic therapist.

Or, as former NBA coach Chuck Daly said at the 1995 National Athletic Trainers’ Association meeting, “You don’t see athletic trainers being interviewed after the big game.” Yet without the leadership of the athletic therapist, many quarterbacks, gymnasts, guards, and goalies would be on the sidelines or in the stands unable to play due to an injury.

Contrary to popular belief, leadership does not mean limelight. Leadership is practiced in many ways. Athletic therapists can be effective leaders in sports and have a profound impact on its future. What are the implications of leadership for athletic therapists?

The View From Below

Many studies have been conducted on leadership and leaders, primarily from the leader’s perspective. But let’s look at leadership from a different perspective: from the eyes of the follower. After all, one cannot be a leader without followers. Kouzes and Posner (1993) conducted a survey asking people what qualities they look for and admire in leaders. Four characteristics surfaced as the most admired qualities. Kouzes and Posner describe these characteristics as,

1. Honest—In every survey we conducted, honesty has been selected more often than any other leadership characteristic. Honesty has to do with trust, integrity, consistency between word and deed, and moral character. (pp. 14-15)

2. Forward Looking—The domain of leadership is the future. The most significant contribution leaders make is not to today’s bottom line but to the long-term development of people and institutions. We expect our leaders to have... vision. (pp. 15-16)

3. Inspiring—It is not enough for the leader to have a dream for the future. The leader must be able to communicate the vision in ways that inspire us to sign up for the duration. [We want to follow someone who is] uplifting and dynamic, exudes excitement, has a sense of humor and makes us feel good about ourselves. (pp. 16-17)

4. Competent—To enlist in another’s cause we must believe that that person is capable and effective. Competence in this instance means not simply technical abilities, but the capacity to get things done on our behalf. (pp. 17-18)

These four valued characteristics can provide a blueprint for leadership development of sports health care professionals. What is the relationship, then, between these characteristics and professional guidelines? How can we apply these insights on leadership to our daily work?

Honesty

The concept of honesty can be expanded to the broader concept of integrity. By definition, integrity is

“INTEGRITY GAUGE” QUESTIONS:
- Do my behaviors match my beliefs?
- Are my words consistent with my acts?
- Do I tell the truth?
- Do I act according to my professional code of ethics and standards?

...
strive to achieve" and includes five basic principles:
1. Respect the rights, welfare, and dignity of all individuals.
2. Comply with the laws and regulations governing the practice of athletic training.
3. Accept responsibility for the exercise of sound judgment.
4. Maintain and promote high standards in the provision of services.
5. [Avoid] conduct that constitutes a conflict of interest or that adversely reflects on the profession.

The issue of integrity is also addressed in the Standards of Practice (NATA Standards, 1987; Ray, 1994) and in the Professional Practice and Disciplinary Procedures for Athletic Training (NATA Board, 1994).

Although integrity is addressed via professional documents, it goes far beyond the standards set by a professional organization. It includes internal factors such as the willingness to keep commitments, finishing a job once started, and the desire to perform optimally. An athletic trainer must always be positive but truthful.

Few athletic therapists would ever intentionally mislead the athlete; however, the athletic therapist might tell the athlete that if he or she does everything asked, he/she will be ready to play in 2 weeks. This may or may not be the case. An athlete may work very hard and be highly motivated, yet in 2 weeks still not be ready to play. The athlete will feel he or she has been misled.

Choosing words carefully and being up-front is the first step in developing integrity with anyone.

Vision

One question that is always uppermost in the minds of athletic therapists is “What can we do to keep the athlete from getting hurt? The NATA Role Delineation Study stresses the athletic trainers’ commitment to prevention (Columbia, 1995). The profession of athletic training has always looked toward the future (O’Shea, 1980). This vision is evidenced today in state and federal legislation, innovations of pads and equipment, patents, companies started by athletic trainers, and advances in other areas of athletic therapy.

Leaders in athletic therapy need to continue moving forward. Long-term professional development and vision by the leaders will carry athletic therapists into the 21st century as valuable contributors to the allied health profession. We need to rise above the status quo if we expect to have an impact on the future. In this way we not only earn credibility from our collaborators (doctors, athletes, coaches), we also offer greater value to those we serve. We can either be architects of our future or let it just pull us along. To be a leader is to “raise the bar” and move beyond the comfort of mediocrity to accept the challenge of excellence.

Inspiration

A leader can communicate vision in a way that will inspire others to follow. Athletic therapists communicate with many people every day, but no person is more important than the athlete. The athlete’s need for inspiration may be directly related to the amount of time lost during the season or the success in competition.

An athletic therapist’s energy and excitement can carry over to motivate the athlete. Motivation may come, for example, from using small increases in weight during rehabilitation to show positive results more often, or by varying the activities to prevent boredom, or by encouraging and praising the athlete. When the athlete is made to feel good about himself or herself, he or she will be more willing to listen to the athletic therapist.

Every time the athletic therapist works with an athlete, it creates a teacher/student relationship. The teaching may take the form of explaining how to do an