LEADERSHIP is obviously an important factor in any professional field. Organizations expend tremendous resources to get it. Clearly, athletic trainers need to possess leadership skills. The Pew Health Professions Commission has stated that all healthcare professionals need to practice leadership, even if they are not in leadership or management roles. Thus, leadership can be practiced by anyone at any level; however, leadership is a very nebulous term that means many different things to different people. As important as leadership is, it is perhaps the “least understood phenomenon on earth.” The conscientious athletic trainer must ask what constitutes leadership within athletic training and do these “leadership” skills help my profession outside of the athletic training context? The purpose of this report is to help the athletic trainer better understand leadership and the manner in which it can be developed and used.

**What Is Leadership?**

There is no single agreed-upon definition of leadership. Burns has defined leadership as “inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and motivations . . . of both leaders and followers.” An older definition of leadership from the 1920s is “the ability to impress the will of the leader on those led and induce obedience, respect, loyalty, and cooperation.” Others define leadership as merely influence, or as the process of influencing the behaviors and attitudes of others to achieve intended outcomes.

Most people can identify leadership in action (identification of a leader when seen) but have difficulty describing leadership. Because the healthcare context is dynamic, leadership requires multiple behaviors. Whether a given skill or behavior is a unique aspect of leadership or is part of some other construct is difficult to determine. Taking into account the dynamic complexity of healthcare, leadership can be defined as the ability to ethically influence others, regardless of title or role, toward the accomplishment of goals and objectives.

**Why Leadership Is Important**

Leadership is widely perceived as important and necessary, but what does leadership produce that might not be produced if leadership were absent? Leadership tends to create the perception of credibility and often establishes or strengthens relationships. Leadership is associated with increased consensus, motivation, morale, and dedication of followers. Leadership tends to produce positive change, innovation, creativity, a sense of direction and hope for the future, stronger sense of
community, personal growth, satisfaction, and contentment. It ensures the coordination of functions and tends to foster leadership in others. Many of these attributes are desirable for the athletic training profession. Athletic trainers should understand, develop, and exhibit leadership, a quality that employers value. The athletic training profession needs leaders who are creative and innovative, who will foster change and growth, and who can further advance athletic training as a respected profession within the healthcare community.

When exercising leadership, there is often greater job satisfaction, which ultimately benefits the employer as well as the athletic trainer’s family and friends. Athletic trainers who effectively provide leadership may realize greater influence over athletes, athlete’s parents, financial managers, and athletic program supporters. Leadership creates a perception of credibility, which causes others to gain greater respect for the individual and the athletic training profession. Ironically, this benefit can be realized when the athletic trainer’s leadership is exhibited in a context completely outside athletic training, such as participation in civic or social groups.

**Leadership and Management Differences**

When leadership is defined as something anyone can practice in any context, it is important to differentiate it from management. The management “role” relates to any formal administrative responsibility recognized by an organization or employer, and it typically has a specific title associated with it, such as “Head Athletic Trainer” or “Rehabilitation Director.” Occupying a role that has an associated title does not imply leadership competence.

Leadership transcends context, whereas management is restricted to context. For example, a head athletic trainer has managerial authority over his or her staff only in the context of work. Outside the work setting, he or she has no formal authority; however, the athletic trainer may have influence over his or her student-athletes or coworkers outside of the work context by virtue of expertise and the relationship. Leadership transcends organizational boundaries and can be exercised outside a formal management role.

Another conceptual difference between management and leadership is reflected in attitude and preference. Leaders emphasize vision, inspiration, and change, whereas managers prioritize maintenance of equilibrium and the status quo. Managerial authority tends to be imposed when technical difficulties or recurring problems arise, which are addressed by preestablished policies and procedures. Leadership is exhibited when problems do not have preestablished solutions, and therefore require adaptability, critical thinking, creativity, and innovation. Although management and leadership represent different constructs, they are often employed simultaneously by the same individual. For example, many head athletic trainers must implement management techniques in daily program operations while simultaneously exhibiting leadership in interactions with staff members and peers (i.e., coaches and administrators). Figure 1 outlines the manner in which management and leadership can be integrated.

**Important Leadership Skills for Athletic Trainers**

There are multiple leadership competencies that healthcare professionals should possess. Table 1 lists and describes six leadership factors important to athletic training.

**Personality Characteristics**

Personality characteristics include attitudes or beliefs, either innate or learned, that are often associated with leadership. Leadership personality is a somewhat mystical attribute that attracts other people to the