

SOCCER COACHING AND LEADERSHIP

Soccer coaches face various challenges that make coaching not always so simple. We are getting much better at learning the game from the coaching aspect through US Soccer, US Youth Soccer and the NSCAA. Training that most youth coaches can receive is technically better than at any point in the past. However, playing soccer well or knowing the game well are not enough by themselves. That purely soccer aspect is barely a start point, and coaches need to be more complete as teachers and leaders on and off the field. Unfortunately, the part about coaching that isn't between the touch lines is lacking.

The truly effective and valuable coaches are easy to spot. They are technically competent, but they also are the kind that communicate well, seem to attract people from everywhere and still achieve results. You know the kind - they have one team that attracts players easy enough to turn into two or three teams. The players seek these teams and the players develop. The team can be elite competitive U18, or U8's just starting to really learn, but the masterfully effective coach somehow works no matter what the team age. Other coaches seem left to struggle. Why does that happen?

Soccer training and licensing strongly trend towards teaching working with the ball, and about the ball. The rest of the iceberg is hardly touched and certainly not in a professional way. Coaches that cultivate true leadership skills, or are trained in them, gain an advantage that explains why knowledge of a soccer ball doesn't always equal successful coaching.

Think about what the professional military considers critical for its leaders. It establishes core values: Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage. It expects its officers and NCO's to need traits of leader intelligence: Mental Agility, Sound Judgment, Innovation, Interpersonal Tact, and Domain Knowledge. The military establishes competencies that describe and measure effectiveness.

Consider the competencies shown at right that the Army considers critical for being effective leaders, even under stress. Do these look like needs that a soccer coach would have in dealing with young players, parents, referees, staff and other coaches? They absolutely do. We ask coaches to lead by example in their conduct with referees. We expect a coach to build a positive team climate with the kids on the team. We expect the coach to prepare for practices and prepare themselves by licensing and training over the long term. If you are a coach, do these competencies look like they fit you?

In truth, the universal leadership traits apply so well to coaching that we quickly note when things go very wrong with a coach who lacks them. We all know of coaches in constant state of conflict with referees. Tyrant coaches screaming from sidelines can be found at any tournament field. Go look and listen! How frequent are youth coaches who never communicate plans or leave players and parents in the dark?

LEADER COMPETENCIES

Leads others (Motivate, Inspire, and Influence)

Extends influence beyond what is simply required

Leads by example as role models with high standards.

Communicates effectively (critically essential for all other competencies)

Creates a positive climate

Prepares oneself

Develops others

Gets consistent, effective and ethical results

The problem that youth sport coaches encounter is that the sport's coaching system and the systems like the military are essentially backwards from each other. Military leaders are trained, taught and evaluated on these personal skills, in most cases, long before they ever assume leadership positions. Learning how to lead comes first. Coaches – even at high levels, but especially at entry level – come from the ranks of players or parents. Their immediate skill is being able to play or having a child on the team, or sometimes both. Being able to teach and lead can often arrive secondarily, and mostly as a matter of trial and error.

Coaching education rarely gives mention to leadership topics, and certainly does not make it a significant effort. And yet, these are the qualities that almost always apply to the best coaches.

Doug Williamson, a member of the NSCAA National Academy staff, and the NSCAA **Soccer Journal** Editorial Board, described these as leader talents for coaching.

Great leaders provide clear, consistent direction. They:

- ❖ create a vision and direction.
- ❖ see the big picture.
- ❖ conceptualize the process and the issues and allow for contingencies.
- ❖ focus their associates on clear, consistent goals.
- ❖ are goal-oriented and have the ability to make corrections

Outstanding leaders drive results. They are:

- ❖ highly-motivated, intense and achievement-oriented.
- ❖ Driven with the thought “I can do this.”
- ❖ competitive – they want to win.
- ❖ persistent in the face of obstacles, sell their ideas and drive performance.
- ❖ courageous and will battle when convinced they are right.
- ❖ courageous enough to lead.
- ❖ activators.
- ❖ willing to let others achieve.



The best leaders maximize their human resources. They:

- ❖ relate to associates and peers to build teamwork and support.
- ❖ connect at a deep, personal level.
- ❖ are multi-relaters – they can meet a lot of people and connect with all.
- ❖ have individualized perception - that is, they treat everyone as an individual.
- ❖ develop people to meet future challenges and take joy in watching someone improve.
- ❖ create a climate conducive to partnership and growth.

Effective leaders are performance-oriented. They:

- ❖ are responsible and ethical.
- ❖ help individuals grow as people.
- ❖ are arrangers and have the ability to coordinate.
- ❖ have the ability to get people to work together as a team.
- ❖ are strategic thinkers and have new strategies ready when plans are blocked.

Effective leaders manage systems. They:

- ❖ can create lean, effective organizations that maximize individual impact.
- ❖ are administratively effective, well-organized and disciplined in their approach to work.

So how does this boil down to something manageable for a youth soccer coach? Generally speaking, interacting with adult parents and children of any age is no different with players aged 5 or 15 as far as off-field skills matter. These are universal. Essential skills for you and the success of your teams are to:



COMMUNICATE: Get the concepts out of your head and to the people who need them verbally and in writing. Be clear, engaging and brief. Communicate to those who need your direction and guidance, and communicate to those who are expecting to give you instructions and guidance.

THINK AHEAD: Be punctual in what you do. Last minute thinking is barely thinking at all. There is a saying – Early is on time, on time is late, late is unacceptable. Apply that though for planning and on the field. We live in a world of traffic and other headaches, but watch for the coach who is always at a practice field and prepared before their players ever arrive. Odds are that coach thinks that way about everything.

BE PURPOSE DRIVEN: If you are a coach, then you should have goals to reach for yourself and your team. Set goals, plan the way to get there, and go do it. This is the rough equivalent of a player receiving a ball and either standing there waiting for it or moving to it. People with purpose move.

BE TECHNICALLY PRPARED: Coaches have skills just like players, and no leader can lead without tradecraft knowledge. Know the game. This doesn't mean that a coach of 5 year olds needs to know overlapping runs, 3-2-4-1 or 4-4-2 formations, or teaching volleys, but know the skills needed for your age players. Then learn more.

LEAD BY EXAMPLE: The coach is probably the most watched person on the field. Look the part, maintain composure, treat people with respect, and show integrity. Others will follow that lead.

AIM TO SUCCEED: Sports are inherently competitive. While we know the excesses of win-at-all-cost types in youth sports, there is great value in teaching children to have goals, have standards and work hard to achieve them. In the long run, that lesson may be more important than the sport itself.

ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY: Leaders are responsible for their own actions and accountable those around them. Don't duck responsibility and be courageous enough to lead.

BE POSITIVE: Coach Anson Dorrance's very first team core value is his focus combined with quote from George Bernard Shaw: "**We don't whine.** *The true joy in life is to be a force of fortune instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.*" A positive attitude makes a big difference and creates more of the same.

Effective leadership is the real backbone strength of a coach. How much he or she knows about a soccer ball and can teach that is carried by the coach's ability to work with people and motivate them to follow. Neither soccer skills nor leadership skills survive well without the other for a soccer coach, and the smart ones build on that skill relationship.

LEADER COMPETENCIES (EXPANDED)

Leads others: Leaders motivate, inspire, and influence others to take the initiative, work toward a common purpose, accomplish tasks, and achieve organizational objectives.

Extends influence: Leaders must extend their influence beyond direct lines of authority and chains of command. This influence may extend to joint, interagency, intergovernmental, multinational, and other groups, and helps shape perceptions about the organization.

Leads by example: Leaders are role models for others. They are viewed as the example and must maintain standards and provide examples of effective behaviors. When Army leaders model the Army Values, they provide tangible evidence of desired behaviors and reinforce verbal guidance by demonstrating commitment and action.

Communicates: Leaders communicate by expressing ideas and actively listening to others. Effective leaders understand the nature and power of communication and practice effective verbal and written techniques so they can better relate to others, and translate goals into actions. Communication is essential to all other leadership competencies.

Creates a positive climate: Leaders are responsible for establishing and maintaining positive expectations and attitudes, which produce the setting for positive attitudes and effective work behaviors.

Prepares self: Leaders are prepared to execute their responsibilities fully. They are aware of their limitations and strengths and seek to develop and improve their knowledge. Only through preparation, awareness of self and situations, and the practice of lifelong learning can individuals fulfill the responsibilities of leadership.

Develops others: Leaders encourage and support the growth of individuals and teams to facilitate the achievement of organizational goals. Leaders prepare others to assume positions within the organization

Gets results: Leaders provide guidance and manage resources and the work environment, thereby ensuring consistent and ethical