



# National Soccer Coaches Association of America

## Leadership Laboratory

*Developing players' leadership abilities can pay dividends*

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**By Nan Carney-DeBord**

The laboratory is a hardwood floor. The subjects are women between the ages of 18 and 22. Their area of interest is basketball. During my 20 years at Ohio Wesleyan, players have taught me as much about leadership as they have learned about basketball from the coaching staff.

If someone asked me 18 years ago, "Can all people lead?" I would have answered, "All people have the potential to learn how to lead." However, today, after 18 years of coaching, I believe that not all individuals can or desire to lead. It is through careful observation that a coach can identify those players who possess both the natural ability and desire to lead their peers successfully.

The Ohio Wesleyan women's basketball program primarily is concerned with leadership as a function of teamwork. The program's consistent success is correlated directly with the peer leadership program that has developed through the years. Early in one's coaching career, it is not unusual to use a captain-style approach to leadership. Coaches often are caught using catch phrases like "lead by example" or "never let anyone outwork you" or "expect excellence and you will receive it" to motivate their athletes and instill positive leadership behaviors. The longer one coaches, however, the importance of empowering players to lead in ways that highlight their strengths and gain the respect of their peers becomes evident.

Anyone who has ever studied leadership recognizes the importance of delegation and anyone in a leadership position understands the necessity and importance of this important management task. To be productive and efficient in the workplace, one must delegate responsibility. However, the method and process of delegating is an important part of being a successful leader.

It is quite common for some to delegate and nervously oversee the process or, when the task is complete, either overtly or subtly disapprove of the outcome. Additionally, there is the "outcome oriented" person who waits until the results are complete, observes whether they were successful or unsuccessful, then takes a stance regarding support of the delegated task. All of these situations undermine the process.

### **Elements to Empower**

Empowering leadership follows similar steps as delegation, but the following elements must be present for true empowerment:

### **Belief in Differences**

No two individuals lead alike. Belief in differences is easier said than done. For every task, there are

probably 100 different methods of accomplishing results. A belief in differences not only is imperative to empowering leadership, but also is required for success. Acknowledging and believing in differences are separate concepts. Belief in differences suggests that whether the outcome is as suspected, the different method of the process must be accepted and celebrated by all involved.

### **Agree to Disagree**

This is not a new concept, but once again the subtleties are what make the concept work. The most productive environment and location to agree to disagree are in a place of privacy. If the method of agreeing to disagree is discussed and agreed upon, then the test of success is the action that occurs upon leaving the room. There needs to be a sense of “having one’s back” after agreeing to disagree. A major error in empowering leadership is sharing the disagreement with others or not supporting the action resulting from the disagreement. Disagreement is not disloyalty and should not be thought of as such.

### **Loyalty**

This is often discussed in terms of loyalty to superiors, but it goes both ways. Loyalty is a value frequently spoken of, but rarely understood. Loyalty is a key value in the functioning of a team and the development and use of leadership. As previously mentioned, agreeing to disagree should not be viewed as conflict and being loyal in the support of differences and disagreements will provide positive results. Demonstrated loyalty takes dedication, thought and energy. However, in the empowering process, loyalty is imperative. And, like many other energy sources, it is contagious. Demonstrating loyalty to a captain, teammate, co-worker, subordinate or protégé will produce a sense of empowerment.

### **The Many Styles of Leadership**

There are many styles of leadership. A great deal of time in the last 20 years of coaching was spent observing different behavioral trends, yet each year experience suggests the single most important element within a season for leadership with the basketball team is peer leadership. In coaching, on this team, this is observed as women leading women.

One of the first steps in the development of leadership within our basketball program is to find out how each individual defines leadership as a function of teamwork. We all have our perception of leadership, so during the first team meeting of a new season players are asked to think about this concept and write down what they believe is the relationship between teamwork and leadership. I received the following responses from players when they were asked to define teamwork and discuss how leadership is a function of team unity.

“Teamwork is sacrificing yourself for the betterment of those around you. It is working together and being selfless to make those around you look and play better. It means putting every effort toward the team’s goals. A team needs leadership so it can thrive and be strong.”

“Teamwork is putting together each teammate’s strengths and helping each other with improving weaknesses. Leadership is a key to aid in the process of determining individual roles. It is the top of the pyramid, with the individual team members supplying the base.”

“Teamwork is everyone working hard toward a shared goal. Leadership is the link toward progress. With leadership comes respect. With respect comes communication. Those are key elements that make team

unity occur.”

“Teamwork is a group of people who come together through thick and thin in order to achieve common goals. Teamwork must happen on and off the court. Leadership must be present in order to keep the team together and to be used as a method of communication to be able to work out problems on the team.”

“Teamwork is a group of individuals working together to reach and achieve a common goal. Individuals get along and have fun working hard. Having strong leadership is a key variable in helping individuals work together.”

“Teamwork is a group of people working toward common goals, with leadership being the foundation for holding the group together while pushing team members beyond their comfort level.”

### **Peer Leadership**

Peer leadership occurs within a team or group of individuals who are striving to attain a similar goal. A group of people typically tends to follow more experienced individuals and learn from their actions. In the most successful arenas, tier leadership – a leader of first-year players, a leader of second-year players and so on – also occurs and contributes to the peer leadership development process.

It is imperative that the leader of a group or organization, be it the head coach, president, manager or CEO, has a firm understanding of the nuances/intricacies of peer leadership. Understanding the subtle difference of each leadership level helps ensure that those individuals are guided properly and that each sub-level of leadership shares and communicates a unified vision to the entire group or organization.

As previously mentioned, every individual’s perception of leadership is different. The following represent some of the answers given when the players were asked to define leadership:

- Taking control when needed, but listening to supporting roles.
- Being an example for others on the team.
- Taking control of tough situations.
- Having a good work ethic.
- Positive attitude, knowledge of the game and a strong all-around player.
- Calm the team down.
- Ability to hold a group together through action, vocal means and listening to team members.
- Taking control of the team’s direction – helping to keep communication open – and getting the best out of each teammate.
- Showing (by words and actions) how to get things done or what needs to be done.
- Confiding in someone to bring the team together and fire the team up when needed.
- Setting a good example so others can look to you.
- Setting the example for whatever goal is desired in both words and action so others may follow.
- Ability to gain the trust and confidence of those around you and use it in a productive way.
- Taking the initiative on and off the court.

### **The Development of Leadership**

Once a team understands the terms leadership and teamwork and understands the concept of leadership as a function of teamwork, the process of the development of leadership begins.

**Step 1** - Soon after a season comes to an end, the group, including the coaches, votes for team captains. They are reminded of their definitions of leadership as stated in the very first meeting of the year and asked to vote according to those values. The results tend to lean toward two to four individuals receiving the majority of the votes. As a result we often appoint a leadership team made up of those individuals. From the end of the season until the start of the next academic year, the coaches have almost six months to develop the beginning phases of a relationship with the leadership team.

**Step 2** - The months of April and May set the tone for what is to be accomplished by the team the following season. Primarily, the leadership team is responsible for organization of the off-season training as well as fundraising events. The leadership team also is responsible for meeting and following up with recruits.

**Step 3** - Communication throughout the summer months is essential. Since the coaches spend time at summer camps, the leadership team is required to send e-mail to returning players and newcomers. As the head coach, there are a number of suggestions made to members of the leadership team at this time to incorporate motivation techniques and to define expectations upon each team member's return to campus.

**Step 4** - Upon return to campus, the leadership team is required to attend a seven-week "leadership seminar" held by the head coach. The group is called The Lunch Bunch and meets during the noon hour once a week for seven weeks prior to our first formal practice. We discuss a number of topics, but focus on one topic each week and how that topic may apply to our group. Topic areas include: communication, empowering younger players, teaching pride, how to make confidence contagious. It is during these seven weeks that we establish a foundation and create an atmosphere that structurally is conducive to peer leadership. The process continues throughout the season.

**Step 5** - Individual and team goal-setting takes place. The group defines goals first.

**Step 6** - Each player then has an individual goal-setting meeting with the head coach during the pre-season.

**Step 7** - It is important to determine if players are on track with their stated goals. At mid-season the players again have individual goal-setting meetings with the head coach.

**Step 8** - Once the season is over, it is important that the players determine if goals were met and, if not, why. Postseason evaluation of goals takes place in both individual and team meetings.

The process to promote leadership is detailed and extensive and takes a great deal of time, but the consistency of the program over a period of time demonstrates the effectiveness of the program. The strength of the team is related directly to the strength of the leadership developed within the team.

*Editor's note: At the time of writing this Nan Carney-DeBord is a professor of physical education and the women's basketball coach at Ohio Wesleyan University. A six-time North Coast Athletic Conference Coach of the Year, she earned Division III National Coach of the Year honors from the Women's Basketball Coaches Association in 2001 after leading her team to a 26-7 record and the NCAA semifinals.*