



National Soccer Coaches Association of America

The Coach and Team Leaders Sharing The Leadership

Players who come to the fore can mold a successful team

By Tony DiCicco

As a coach of elite players, I learned fairly early that the top coaches are not only experts at tactics and in knowledge of the game, but are experts in dealing with people and facilitating peak performance. By using “emotional intelligence” in coordination with soccer intelligence, a coach can affect leadership throughout the layers of the team. Leadership becomes a team culture.

A team’s culture is formed from the unwritten rules within the team, the codes of behavior that provide the guidelines for individual decision-making. It establishes a “threshold of expectations” which determine goals and objectives of the team with, of course, the guidance of the coach.

A funny story about the culture on the 1999 World Cup Championship Women’s National Team involved Michelle Akers. She said, “When young or new players come into the women’s national team, Tony has asked us to go up and introduce ourselves and try to make them feel welcome and at home. Tony wanted to help them compete against us while in camp. So, I would go up to a young player and introduce myself as Michelle Akers and say, ‘good luck and I hope we get to know each other better while you are here.’ Then the next day when we trained, I would kick the crap out of her because she was trying to take my job.”

On the Women’s National Team of the ’90s, we had layers of leadership. Not just one leader, although we did have a number one leader and that was Carla Overbeck. But, we had another co-captain level leader in Julie Foudy and then leadership from Kristine Lilly, Joy Fawcett, Mia Hamm, Briana Scurry, Tisha Venturini, Brandi Chastain and more.

Assigning roles

As a coach you establish leadership by confiding in your top leader or leaders with some of your key decisions. They feel empowered by knowing they had a say in the direction of the team. You also establish leadership by looking for those moments when great leadership takes place and you can stop everyone and celebrate it or acknowledge it publicly. For instance, whenever we unloaded a bus or all the bags at the baggage claim area, the players who were always there first were the veterans like Overbeck, Foudy and Lilly. There was no “rookie duty” or “I’ve played internationally this many times, so I don’t have to unload bags.”

The philosophy on the team was that, for us to win, we needed each other to pitch in on the field, so we all pitched in off the field as well. So, on occasion, I would mention that once again, the first people to help unload bags were Carla, Julie and Kristine. Without saying anything else more players would be conscious of this responsibility next time because they wanted to do their share also and out of respect for these veteran leaders.

Another opportunity to develop leadership is to give a player the role of warming up the team or organizing the team for a 7 v. 7 game or whatever. I often did this with the goalkeepers. I would say to my three goalkeepers, “Each of you take seven players and warm them up — you have 15 minutes.” The keepers had to take a leadership role. Or I would say, “Tiffany, organize your team for this 7 v. 7 scrimmage.” Now every player on her team will have to listen and she needs to organize because none of these players wants to get beat in the scrimmage.

Leadership space

As coaches we must remember that leaders create space for others to lead. This empowers your staff and your players and is essential in creating a culture of leadership within the team. However, we must all realize that to establish a leadership culture within a team or any organization requires establishing trust between the coach or supervisor and the team players. It’s important for the coach to establish a “threshold of expectations” on how the team behaves, interacts, trains, plays and respects the opponent, the referee, themselves and each other. I always felt that in some ways I was a better person when with the team. I was more tolerant, more compassionate and empathetic. I believe that everyone associated with our championship teams of the 1996 Olympics and the 1999 World Cup felt the same way.

If you examine leadership on a successful team, you will see some of the following: a vocal leader, the cheerleader of the team (Foudy); the on-field general to whom everyone responded during the game (Overbeck); the inspirational leader who everyone looks up to (Fawcett or Akers); the leader by example who sets and resets the standards (Lilly and Akers); in the case of my team, the public's perceived leaders, who therefore became the team's spokespersons (Hamm and Chastain); and the leaders among the reserves or nonstarters (Venturini and Roberts). This clearly indicates layers of leadership and a culture of leadership within the team; however, these are not the only examples nor the only leaders.

The reserve players

In the 1999 World Cup, Shannon MacMillan was a reserve, but a key player in all our games. She, of course, wanted to start but we were winning and I didn't want to change the line-up. The press was hounding both Shannon and me about when she was going to start and if she would start the next game. At one point, Shannon came up to me and said, "I know you're getting hammered by the press about me starting — I want to play every minute, but whatever you decide, I support." Can a coach ask for a better example of leadership? Although she said that specifically to me, everyone on the team knew her sentiment. Who could question playing time if Shannon, as well as she was playing, was willing to accept her role? Something that has been very rewarding to me is seeing the Women's National Team players in the WUSA. Because they have been spread around the league, they have all had to accept the leadership positions on their team. For some, it has not been easy, but for others, like Milbrett, it has been a great opportunity for her to show what an outstanding leader she can be. Her strong personality, commitment and leadership were key factors in New York Power getting to within a goal of the championship game in the WUSA's inaugural season.

I have never witnessed a team that could win over time without exceptional leadership, without leadership as one of the covenants of the team culture. I was privileged to see it first hand, every day through the 1990s with the remarkable group of soccer athletes and players on the Women's National Team.

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