

Factsheet 12: Leadership in Sport

'Leaders are made, they are not born. They are made by hard effort, which is the price which all of us must pay to achieve any goal that is worthwhile' - Vince Lombardi, Green Bay Packer Head Coach who won 2 x Super Bowls and 5 x NFL Championships.

'It is better to lead from behind and to put others in front, especially when you celebrate victory when nice things occur. You take the front line when there is danger. Then people will appreciate your leadership' - Nelson Mandela



What is leadership?

Leadership is a very difficult thing to define. For example in the University of Strathclyde library there is over 3000 books on leadership alone containing 150+ definitions on the topic! For a long time psychologists tried to define 'good' or 'poor' leaders by personality traits e.g. charisma or intelligence. However this idea is also difficult as what might be a useful trait for leading in one situation may be inappropriate in another. For example, select any five leaders you respect within sport and begin to write down their characteristics. You will begin to notice that each leader has different personalities and thus character traits. Instead rather than looking at what is 'inside' leaders, research and applied work has focused on the *actions* of leaders - with leadership defined by what is practically good (useful in the context) and morally good (entails a strong sense of right and wrong).

Is it just coaches or captains that lead?

The idea that leadership only belongs to a person in a position of authority is incorrect. Warren Bennis, a famous leadership scholar, once stated that *'management is about doing things right, while leadership is about doing the right things'*. So we shouldn't assume people in a management role (like that of a coach or captain) is a good leader, and likewise, that those not in management roles are poor leaders. John Kotter, who has written extensively on leadership differs leadership and management as follows:

Management

- Dealing with Complexity
- Planning
- Controlling and problem solving
- Organising and staffing

Leadership

- Dealing with Change
- Developing a vision
- Alignment with vision
- Motivating through empowerment

In essence it is important for any athlete to know they can lead at different times in a sport for a variety of reasons:



The coach does not go on the ice, on the pitch, on the court etc. Coaches can provide a form of leadership in their role but it is athletes who take the lead when they performing.



During a game a team may lose its captain for many reasons e.g. an injury or a dismissal. It cannot lose its direction when one person is removed. It is

important therefore that others around this individual can also lead when required.



At certain moments in a team sport, a number of players may take on the responsibility for the direction of that game. In essence they lead - for example kicking for goal in rugby, a free kick in football or delivering a stone in curling.



Leading doesn't simply happen during 'big moments' in competitions but also occurs day to day in more mundane ways. For example this may involve setting standards in training, how you treat new people in their environment, or the levels of engagement you have with staff. All are opportunities to extend, and thus lead, your sporting performance in an advanced direction. Leadership therefore can involve you personally 'pushing the boundaries' of what you know, thus acting as a role model for others.

THE PETER PRINCIPLE

Within business, the idea that great employees do not always become great managers or leaders is called the 'The Peter Principle'. There is a credibility gap here as leading or managing is a specific set of skills onto itself. For example Martin Johnson, who won the Rugby World Cup as captain of England in 2003, was chosen to manage the team without much experience of such a role in 2008. He resigned after a poor World Cup in New Zealand in 2011, in which his team went out in the quarter finals to France. Similarly, coaches who have demonstrated strong leadership were not always the best players. For example Arrigo Sacchi won two European Cups with A.C. Milan but never played professional football. He once joked:



'What's the problem here?...If you want to be a good jockey, it's not necessary to have been a horse?!'

Is leadership born or made?

As the Vince Lombardi quote at the start of this factsheet suggests, leadership is something that can be developed rather than something you are born with. Specifically, you *become* a leader through learning, reflection and application of your ideas. Also you cannot be denoted as a 'good leader' simply by being part of a successful team that wins. Indeed, many players and athletes speak of how they have experienced good leadership in their environment and lost, and similarly won during times of bad leadership as well. Also, even if you were a talented athlete does not mean you will become a great captain or coach for leadership is not dependent on athletic ability (see 'The Peter Principle' on page 3). To be able to deliver a practical and moral good within a sport, leadership is founded on a number of specific, useful, qualities that can *add value* to the context in which the individual is in - six of these qualities are listed:

1

It has to matter - passion seems to be crucial for any good leadership. You have to care, but of course not to the degree success comes at a cost to others. It is important the 'flame' of passion burns bright but not destructively out of control.

2

Reflecting - good leaders in sport need to certainly have the capacity to look *outwards* (to devise tactics, analyse etc) but also to look *inwards* - to constantly reflect upon their own behaviour and adjust their approach where necessary.

3

Decision making - leadership can often involve trying to deal with 'wicked problems' - ones with little obvious answers or solutions. Decision making can be developed through strategic thinking. However, good decisions are not simply about the *quality* of the decisions made but also the *willingness* of others to act on such decisions.

4

Communicating - good communication is a skill that can be developed. Learning to listen to others, reflect back what they are saying, and be believable and trustworthy in your responses takes time to develop. Timing is also crucial in delivering the right message at the most appropriate time - this may, *or may not*, be before a game or at half time.

5

Being fair - research has shown us that one of the biggest factors around good leadership is fairness. Consistency is crucial therefore ensuring all athletes involved must accept a *standard* in how team mates behave generally but also what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour during performances.