

***Creating Leaders:
Developing Leadership Qualities in Your Players***

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Many coaches feel comfortable with the talent level on their team and with their offensive and defensive schemes, yet some are still uneasy. They have serious questions about intangibles that they feel they have no control over, such as how their team will react when they are truly tested. They often feel a lack of control come game time, knowing that a large part of their team's success is determined by the leadership on the field.

Strong leaders are essential for success, but some teams are slow to develop strong leadership. On the field, leaders play key roles in crunch-time situations and assist teammates with assignments and game-time emotions. Off the field, they assist with the resolution of team conflict and help to bring players together to become a more cohesive unit. Having a few players with these qualities can be the difference between a miserable and a successful season, but identifying and encouraging such athletes may seem to be an inexact science.

Coaches, oftentimes, unknowingly play enormous roles in supporting or hindering leadership development. Some coaches rarely give athletes a chance to make decisions, structuring their days and practices so that they have little say in their workouts or schedules. When some football players are put in situations in which they need to make a decision quickly, their confusion is apparent: they can often be found looking to the coach for the answer because they lack the confidence to make that decision on their own, and that is precisely what they have been conditioned to do.

However, coaches can become part of the solution and develop leadership qualities in selected athletes. Here are six suggestions that can help you systematically integrate leadership training into your coaching philosophy and your practices.

1. *Designate Leaders* - Discuss with your coaching staff which of players display leadership qualities. Don't fall into the trap of only considering seniors, those who have been with you for an extended period, or starters as being qualified. Players from the scout teams, special teams, and motivated underclassmen may play integral roles as emotional and determined leaders. Pull these athletes aside at the beginning of the season and tell them that you see them as leaders *on and off* the field. Let them know that your expectations of them are higher than they have been in the past, and take a moment to clearly define some specific roles and responsibilities (e.g., leading stretching, organize pre-game get-togethers, assume a vocal role in practice and games, etc.). When athletes know you hold them in high esteem they will perceive themselves in a different way, and hold themselves to your standards.

2. *Encourage Ownership* – Coaches generally begin the season with a clear vision of the type of team their current group can be, as it is impossible to lead effectively without this vision. In developing such a vision, you need to speak with your leaders. While speaking with your leaders could prove challenging, their contributions will benefit you in the end. Simply listening to a player's input sends a message that you're interested in what they have to say. Including some of their ideas in your efforts, sends the message that you're willing to put your money where your mouth is. Additionally, speaking with individual leaders who may be making sacrifices for the larger vision may prevent rotten apples as the season evolves. For example, selling the leader of receiving corps that your taking on a smash-mouth style for the up-coming season may curb concerns and worries about the receiving corps role. Additionally, asking him how the receivers can assist with the new style, how it will benefit them (running creates the one-on-one match-ups), and encouraging him to speak with the other receivers will encourage feelings of unity and cooperation rather than frustration and distrust.
3. *Developing Leadership Confidence* - Confidence comes from success, and you, as the coach, define success. Although you cannot always control the outcome of games or individual match-ups, you can help to build leaders' confidence by defining success as playing smart and playing hard. Rather than praising outcomes, praise smart play and effort. In doing this, you will create a self-policing system, supportive of a positive team climate. In response to your praise for hard work, they will likely begin to praise the diligence of others.
4. *Leader Involvement* - There are many ways to give athletes a sense of ownership. For example, after a good practice, give the leaders a choice between two to three conditioning drills. The team will still get the necessary conditioning, but the leaders will be part of the decision and their roles as leaders will be highlighted to the rest of the team. Other examples include input on team apparel, scheduling, locker room décor, etc.
5. *Leaders Must Think!* - We have all watched game tape of teams that lose their composure in pressure situations. To avoid this, place your leaders in situations on the practice field where they are forced to make decisions. For example, have your scout-team go into a no-huddle, hurry up offense. Don't send signals in to the defense, and note how your defensive leaders react? Use their reaction as a teaching opportunity. If they make the wrong call, tell them why and what the correct call would be. Another effective "drill" is to randomly call a bogus penalty on one of your players – offense or defense. Again, how do the player and leaders respond? After these drills, speak with the team and the leaders about why you did it. If you consistently practice these simulated situations, you will be amazed at how your team reacts in real pressure situations.
6. *Encourage Communication* - This is a soft-skill that is rarely incorporated into football environments. Yet, it can be extremely beneficial. Set up a time when you can sit down with the team leaders together. Create an open environment where they can share team concerns or issues. Let them know that these meetings are confidential, and that you'll only share information with assistants. Encouraging

discussion that ranges from personnel to the play book will assist you, as leaders will become additional eyes and allies on and off the field.

Again, leadership is a skill that is learned. Think of your own progression through the coaching ranks – would you have been able to do ten years ago what you are currently doing now? Probably not. Truly effective coaches do not leave leadership up to chance, they take the active steps to mold players into on-field leaders needed for success.