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Identification and Development...

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Frequently coaches lament that they don't have any true leaders on their teams anymore. It is important for athletics directors to address this issue and give coaches guidance on how to address this challenge.

Many of the reasons fewer student-athletes seem to be naturally evolving into the positions of captain or respected leader were highlighted in my blog on the Millennial Generation:

- when young people are protected from failure they don't learn to cope with failure themselves or be examples for how to do so for others.
- in the youth sports environment where every player is treated equally leads to a lack of understanding that there are more specialized skill and leaderships roles which must be played at the more elite level
- A generation of players with high levels of peer empathy who feel coaches may be too hard on team members and who do not understand that discipline, self- analysis and coach-correction are the heart of skill improvement

Therefore, it is important for coaches to expend significant energy on identifying and preparing candidates for leadership roles.

There are two practical things coaches can focus on to identify potential leaders:

1. Look for the traits that seem to be consistently mentioned in the literature about management and leadership. For example, effective leaders demonstrate: (a) integrity through honest and ethical behavior which, in turn, makes them trustworthy, (b) an aptitude for learning and a consistent desire to improve, (c) accountability for his or her own performance and a desire to be evaluated, and (d) the courage to make decisions and take risks.
2. Pay attention to how potential leaders interact with others. Do they: (a) empower others, (b) communicate persuasively, (c) listen first and seek to be understood second, (d) respect and celebrate difference and (e) command respect from others?

Once leader prospects are identified, think about how to go about training a leader. Where leaders once evolved from previous life experiences, the so-called “natural leader’ may simply not be encountered as frequently because of this protected generation. Consider creating the following leadership experiences for your prospective captains:

- Bring back alumni captains who have been successful in life after sport to talk to captains and prospective leaders selected by coaches of all teams. Have them address the importance of taking responsibility and helping others rise to meet challenges. Most important, have them address the importance of supporting the decisions of the coach and not allowing player expressions of dissatisfaction dictate the team culture.
- Take the time to talk privately to leader prospects and discuss their specific roles and responsibilities and why. For example, a young team might need a different type of captain than a more experienced team. The tradition of team success, or lack thereof, may call for different types of peer leadership.
- Take the time to meet with captains every week or after every game to discuss the performance of all players and the kind of encouragement each player needs to make a better contribution to the team and how team captains can help make that happen
- Openly discuss your own coaching style with captains and why you choose particular forms of motivation and in particular, to explain why or when you use disincentives, incentives or words of encouragement in various situations. When team captains understand these decisions, they are more likely to support a coach being “hard” on players and will often explain to their teammates why the coach is demanding certain behaviors
- Spend time with team captains identifying the “constants” of your approach to teaching the game, determining strategies or the other anchors that are important to teaching your system of play. Explain why consistent expression and commitment to such ‘constants’ is the basis of consistent performance.
- Discuss the basis of your expectations for the success of the program and the goals you have established for the season

Where the words of coaches were once accepted without question, this generation has been taught to question. Thus, it is critical to prepare athlete leaders to be able to reinforce the coach’s philosophy and beliefs.

In order to better accomplish the leader education described above, the athletics director should encourage the coach to conduct a self-examination that includes an assessment of (1) the coach's personal willingness to explain decisions rather than expect blind obedience and (2) tolerance for giving up control to the captains/leaders. If the coach thinks that his or her position obviates the need to explain the 'whys' to players, training leaders is going to be a difficult proposition.

There is no magic bullet for creating leadership and there is no single template that defines the perfect leader for every situation. However, if the coach understands that leadership training is a process that requires consistent effort and a high place on his or her priority list, the likelihood that leadership will evolve will increase.

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