What is Leadership?

A January survey of NSCAA members reveals a variety of interpretations

By Roy J. Baroff and Bill Sanford

What is the difference between a good team and a great one? If you followed March Madness, the pundits focused on the final match-up as being a team with “talent” against a team with “teamwork.” We would suggest that the winning team, the University of North Carolina, rose to the top by combining talent and teamwork through various forms of leadership. How can your team develop leadership to take it from good to great?

With that goal in mind, we partnered with the NSCAA to launch an online survey on leadership in January. More than 1,300 coaches responded, sharing their views on the desired traits and skills of a soccer leader, how they handle formal leadership (team captains), what they do to help develop leadership among their players and what resources they devote to leadership development.

We are still in the process of sifting through the data generated by the survey – more than 150 pages worth. In this article, we outline the survey content, share a few of the “best practices” reported in the survey and pose some critical questions for coaches to consider regarding what they can do to promote leadership on their teams.

What is “leadership”?

Ask 10 coaches what leadership is and you’re likely to get 10 different answers. Ask 1,300 coaches and, well, we decided to take a different approach. Since we all have our own perspectives on leadership, we asked what traits and skills coaches most value in team leaders.

Approximately 80 percent of respondents said that it is especially important for team leaders to have credibility with their teammates, to have good character and to be committed to team goals. Nearly 75 percent named “coachability” (open-minded and responsive to coaching) as an important characteristic and 66 percent chose self-confidence. Interestingly, less than 20 percent said that it was especially important for leaders to be vocal players, and just 11 percent said that it was important for team leaders to be credible with their teammates as skilled players.

In terms of skills important in exhibiting leadership, more than 80 percent selected “encouraging and supporting teammates” and “communicating clearly with teammates and coaches.” “Picking up the level of play on the field” was selected by 70 percent of respondents, with 66 percent citing “motivating teammates when they are down.”

“Oh, Captain, my Captain”

Most teams have one or more players formally designated as a leader, usually as “captains.” We thought coaches would like to know what their fellow coaches are doing in the area of formal leadership. It also is apparent that while leadership is not necessarily limited to a team’s formal leaders, for some coaches, they do focus leadership skills development only on their formal leaders.

Let’s do the numbers: 60 percent had two captains; 24 percent had three; 10 percent had one; and 4 percent had four or more. Only 2 percent of respondents did not have captains on their team.

Two-thirds of the coaches surveyed selected captains themselves, some with input from their players. Approximately 20 percent of the time players were responsible for selecting their captains, and 10 percent of coaches used some other approach, such as coaches selecting one captain and players selecting another.

The principal duties of team captains mentioned by respondents ranged from leading by example, leading pre-game activities and facilitating communication between coaches and players, to enforcing team rules and to just being captains “in name only,” with no specific responsibilities.

Fourteen percent of those surveyed used a Leadership Council in addition to having team captains. Leadership Councils serve different roles on different teams, but among the roles mentioned were dealing with conflict and discipline, planning team activities and events, monitoring the “pulse” of the team, mentoring younger players and/or grooming future captains, providing a “check” on the captains, and giving each class a voice.

Developing leadership

In addition to identifying the core competencies of leadership and how coaches approach formal leadership, we asked coaches to share what they were doing to develop leadership on their teams. In order to elicit the best and most creative ideas, we asked three different questions. A selection of the
responses we received is listed below.

What does your program do to develop leadership on your team?

The most common means of trying to develop leadership was holding regular meetings of “team leaders” and the coaching staff, either in-season (57 percent) or in the off-season (43 percent). More than one-third of respondents also conduct some sort of pre-season activities such as bringing in speakers or doing a ropes course. Mentoring programs (14 percent) and off-season leadership classes (11 percent) were also cited. Significantly, of the 1,300-plus coaches surveyed, 45 percent said they allocated time specifically to support and develop team leaders while only 6 percent budget any funds for leadership development.

A selection of other practices and more detailed responses:

Leadership development is open to all and required by some. Part of the pre-season retreat is dedicated to planning, vision, etc. Team leaders meet with head coach weekly throughout the school year and online during the summer. Bring in other coaches and professors to discuss topics related to personal growth/leadership.

I developed a leadership handbook that I go over with seniors prior to the season. I have incoming seniors’ rank former captains and what they would do differently.

I encourage all players to be leaders not just the captains. Sometimes by the end of the season the leaders are not the captains, but others who have risen to the challenge for all to lead.

Team goes on a mountain hiking trip that brings the team together and establishes leaders.

Describe the most effective things you have done to develop leadership on your team.

Peer evaluations have been useful because they allow players to rate themselves and then compare how they perceive themselves with how they are perceived by the rest of the team.

We have a “mental conditioning coach” who works with the mental state of our team.

We hold a leadership lunch every Friday with specific players. We discuss leadership issues and how to work with other teammates from a leadership perspective.

I point out leadership characteristics that I see on a daily basis to my team no matter who has displayed the qualities because I believe you don’t have to be a captain to be a leader. This fosters a feeling that all players can lead in some way.

Helping players to identify in which ways they are and are not leaders – talking through personality traits and helping them to understand what it means to be a leader.

What’s the best leadership idea you have heard, but have not tried with your team?

Give leaders jobs to do and LET THEM DO IT!

I’d like for more players to take our school’s leadership class. I’d like to include some type of conflict-resolution program.

Each player submitting a “resume” stating their qualities as leaders and then openly discussing each player’s ideas and thoughts.

Use a leadership council. Not having captains. Many of my fellow coaches do not have captains and suggested not doing so. It builds, in their eyes, a stronger team leadership and causes less problems.

Questions to consider

In reviewing the survey results, several issues surfaced that may offer coaches opportunity for further reflection. Here are some:

First, while the portion of the survey devoted to best practices asked about developing “leadership,” we received many comments that focused on developing “leaders.” We believe this distinction is significant. A number of coaches provide leadership development that focuses efforts on a subset of their team. Leadership training is provided for the formal leaders – captains and, in some cases, “senior” players. In contrast, other coaches provide leadership development or training for their entire team. They want everyone to have an opportunity to demonstrate leadership.

As you prepare for your next season, consider whether to focus leadership skills development on a few leaders or whether you want everyone on your team to develop such skills. Our sense is that we talk and work with coaches is that in most every team sport, and especially in a sport like soccer where it takes 11 players on the field, a coach needs each and every player to be able to “step up” and provide leadership at various times and in various ways during a match, during a practice, and during events off the field throughout a season.

A second concept surfaced concerning whether leaders are born or can be taught. Those coaches who believe leaders are born do not appear to put much energy into developing leaders. One coach noted, “It is not the function of a coach to develop leadership.” At the same time, many coaches commented that while leaders are born, leadership skills can be developed with assistance and training. Thus, you may consider your view of leadership and leaders and determine whether your team is functioning at its highest possible level. Do you have enough players who are contributing to the team both on and off the field at a high level? If not, you may wish to consider some of the practices of your fellow coaches to enhance leader.
ship throughout your squad.

Third, what is your “style” as a coach? This theme appeared through the actions taken by coaches around leadership. Do you tend to be more autocratic or democratic? Do you tell your players what is expected or do you facilitate a discussion with your players where you create the expectations together? Or do you do some of both, depending upon the situation? Either way, each style has pros and cons that should be thoughtfully considered as you work to develop leadership on your team.

Finally, does one size of leadership training fit all your players? For example, some players may be internally motivated, in which case reading a book on leadership might be perfect. Others may need external input through team building exercises in a group setting. Some coaches appear to be using a range of activities while others only one approach. Again, consider your approach and whether some tailoring of leadership activities may be in order to reach all your players.

But wait, there’s more!

As expected, the survey yielded a wide range of responses and in this article we’ve tried to give you a broad overview with some detail. In future articles, we will discuss these and other aspects of soccer leadership in greater detail. In the meantime, feel free to send us an email and let us know what has worked well for you, what you find challenging, and what you would like to learn more about.

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