



a coach's leadership

LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVES AND ATTRIBUTES OF SUCCESSFUL TRACK AND FIELD COACHES

By Brian Zuleger M.S.

Among track and field coaches, leadership ability is recognized as an important and integral skill that is necessary for successful individual and team performance. Numerous books, for example, have been written by coaches of all sports who have described their

formulas for success in great detail. Yet there are many programs and coaches at all levels that could benefit from learning not only what it takes to be a successful leader, but how to do it. McGuire and Vernacchia (2010) define leadership as the product of integrity, communication, understanding of human behavior, and knowledge of sport. Effective leadership involves knowledge, technical expertise, communication skills, ingenuity, and charisma (Shrock, 2009).

In an effort to learn more about the leadership philosophies, styles and strategies of track and field coaches, interviews were conducted with 10 (seven male and three female) successful NCAA Division I head track and field coaches. The coaches who agreed to participate in these interviews averaged 28.9 years of track and field coaching experience and developed, on average, 78.1 NCAA Division I All-Americans and 147.6 Academic All-Americans (team GPAs ranged from 2.91-3.4) throughout their coaching careers. Four of the coaches were Olympic team staff members, and six coaches had been members of international track and field teams (i.e. World Championship, etc.). Eight of the coaches developed conference champion teams with two of the coaches having won 24 and 28 conference titles respectively. Two of the coaches had won NCAA Division I national team championships and four of the coaches had been named NCAA Division I national head coach of year.

Interviews were qualitatively analyzed and presented in this article to create a holistic overview of successful leadership characteristics and styles, as well as coaching development and considerations. The emergent leadership themes presented in this article reflect the components and characteristics of the successful leadership perspectives, philosophies and practices of the interviewed coaches.

COMPONENTS OF SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP STYLES ATHLETE-CENTERED LEADERSHIP

The findings from the coaches' comments illustrate the importance of attending to the athlete's personal welfare and align with the sport science research regarding leadership styles (Carter & Bloom, 2009; Giacobbi, Whitney, Roper, & Butryn, 2002; Vallee &

Bloom 2005). All of the coaches' responses in this study highlighted the importance of employing an athlete-centered coaching philosophy. Athlete-centered leadership was the main theme that emerged from the coaches' responses referring to establishing supportive and effective coach-athlete relationships. One coach had this to say regarding utilizing an athlete-centered approach to coaching his teams:

"My intention as a coach is to have your life be better because we met. Now I know my intention is we are supposed to have a good track team and I know my intention is we are supposed to beat our rival, I get it. But at the end of the day, if I've got all the trophies for beating our rival and in the end a bunch of kids that are crappy people in life, have I done anything of any significance? I don't think so. If I never beat our rival...and I have people that go out into life, whole, happy, proud, contributing to a better society, succeeding in life then we make communities better. That's the trophy case."

In a recent interview for *NCAA Champion Magazine*, the highly successful track and field coach Pat Henry of Texas A&M (31 NCAA Division I indoor & outdoor national titles) had this to say when asked what the secret to success is. "If I was going to put a philosophy to it, we coach individuals, and great individuals make a great team" (Johnson, 2011, p. 35).

ATHLETE INVESTMENT

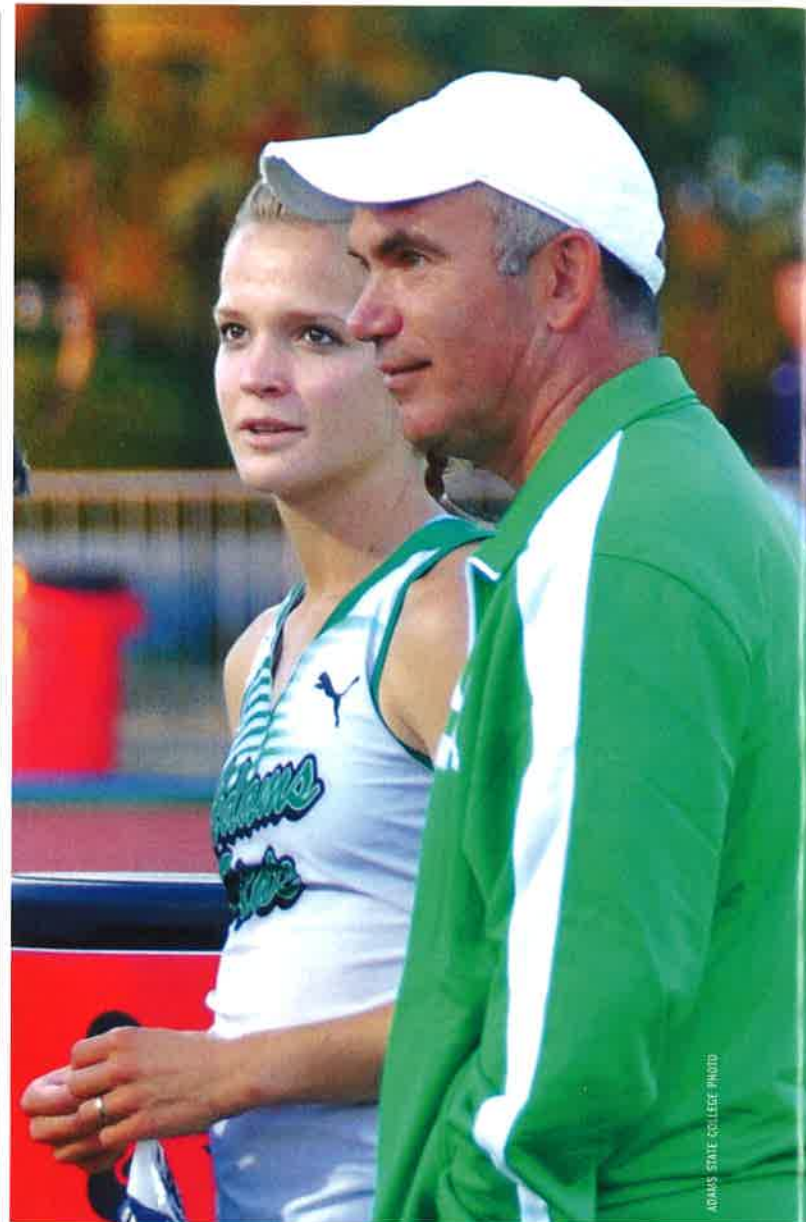
The successful coaches interviewed in this study knew and understood the importance of promoting athlete investment in the leadership process as a component of a successful leadership style. One coach's statement pointed to the importance of developing "ownership" among team members as a result of employing athlete investment strategies:

"My philosophy is that if you can teach and coach proper principles and allow the athletes and coaches to govern themselves in how they accomplish that. Then you will be much more successful because they will have investment in what you are doing and as a result will want to succeed more."

Coaches also discussed the importance of athlete investment in the process of facilitating team cohesion by allowing athletes to select and direct team-building activities that were designed to "bring the team together." The coaches clearly identified a need to remain in the background while team members were allowed to focus on personal growth and development, particularly once the team's mission had been established.

TRUST

The coaches interviewed for this study truly lived by and



were aware of the importance of establishing a trusting coach-athlete relationship. One of the statements by a coach provides a good example of what many of the coaches expressed in similar ways:

"If you can't have integrity, you can't be honest, you can't be trustworthy, your athletes will pick up on that faster than you know and they will not run through the wall for you, they won't believe you and that creates a lot of problems."

TEAM ENVIRONMENT

In an effort to foster quality competitive efforts and performances, coaches identified the importance of creating an environment for championship performance by estab-

lishing quality lifestyle, training and performance standards for their teams. The coaches' established standards for their teams that were very simple, clearly outlined and revolved around treating people with respect, being academically focused and having a desire to be your best as an individual. The coaches also mentioned that as leaders they serve as role models for their staff and student-athletes by making efforts to instill a commitment to personal responsibility among team members in all aspects of their lives.

The importance of serving as a model of emotional control and stability for their athletes was critical to their leadership and coaching success. An example of this is provided as one coach stated that:

"You have to provide an environment where they feel the importance of being on that roster, that it is important that you have the opportunity to represent, you have pride, you have the opportunity to be something other than average here."

STUDENT-ATHLETE CONSIDERATIONS

Coaches identified that, as leaders, they are responsible for teaching and providing opportunities for the athletes to learn and practice sound leadership behaviors that include leading a balanced student-athlete lifestyle. Coaches emphasized the importance of the personal responsibility/accountability relationship that enables student-athletes to become independent and reliable persons. Goal-setting was identified by coaches as an important way of helping student-athletes achieve this end, as well as, training and competitive success. Coaches discussed the need to ensure that goals were clear, identifiable and relevant to the individual student-athlete in relation to academics, athletics and lifestyle factors.

Coaches discussed a need to utilize team captains and leaders in order to create a positive team climate that stresses mentorship, particularly between veteran and new team members. Team captains and leaders were viewed as instrumental in conveying teams' philosophies and missions to all team members. Athlete-driven team leadership was viewed as an effective way to engage student-athletes in determining the direction of a track and field program.

Academic achievement, as much or more than athletic achievement, was a priority for all of the coaches interviewed. This perspective, in turn, influenced many of the leadership and coaching decisions coaches made regarding the student-athlete focus of their programs.

The coaches highlighted the need for the coach to be involved and engaged as a leader in the academic development of team members. Athletics and academics can-

not be separated and coaches recognized that academic and athletic performance can affect each other in both positive and negative ways. In reference to the importance of academic achievement, Pat Henry stated: "Sports are, for most of our athletes, an avenue to their education. Athletics is a short period in your life, and your academics last your entire life. We talk about it every single day" (Johnson, 2011, p. 35).

PROCESS ORIENTATION

Several coaches identified that in order to be successful as a leader the team members have to be engaged and enjoy the process of being a team member (practice, competition, and everything that goes into being a student-athlete). The coaches in this study spend time in relationship-building activities and interactions with their athletes in order to "get to know them" by demonstrating their care and concern for team members. Coaches indicated that the process of being on a team should be fun and create an exciting atmosphere that motivates student-athletes to work hard to achieve both team and individual goals. One coach stated that:

"They spend a lot of time at practice; you spend a lot of time with them. It's got to be fun, it has to be challenging it has to be stimulating and like I said you really have to pick and choose the times where you really want to dig down. It just can't be every day. I kind of try to make it fun and try to understand what makes the athletes tick. What cues motivate them, what cues help them get to where they want to get to?"

RECRUITING

Coaches discussed the need to recruit athletes who are "the right fit for their programs." One example of a coach's response on this topic was:

"The environment is so critical. We really want them to feel good about the people they are around. So in the recruiting process we are trying to identify kids that we feel and kids who they feel that this is the right environment for them. They are not just coming because we are offering them more money than someone else. They are not coming because of all these other people who have performed well athletically or whatever, they are coming because it's the right fit for them. Every decision we make everything we do hinges on those principles."

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL LEADERS

Mark Guthrie, former University of Wisconsin-Lacrosse head coach (22 team national titles) and current University of Wisconsin-Madison assistant coach, (one additional team national title) is one of the most successful college track and field coaches in the history of the

sport. In his book *Coaching Track and Field Successfully* Guthrie highlights the following principles on which to base leadership: "Be yourself, have confidence, have composure, be an example, have defined coaching objectives, establish rules, build and nurture relationships with athletes, be organized, involve assistant coaches, help athletes manage their goals and stress, and focus on the big picture" (Guthrie, 2003, p. 6).

COMMUNICATION

The coaches in this study related the importance of communicating effectively with team members. They focused on the need to provide athletes with the appropriate information and feedback in a timely manner. An emphasis was placed on the need for communication to be clear, concise and direct so as to avoid any confusion and conflict. Coaches also highlighted a need for communication to be based on respect in order for it to be effective and receptive to all involved. In order to be effective communicators, head coaches were receptive to feedback from both their athletes and assistant coaches.

ADAPTABILITY

A number of coaches in this study also recognized that track and field is a very diverse sport in terms of personalities, mentalities, and events, as well as, physical, cultural, and behavioral characteristics. For these reasons coaches must employ an adaptive leadership and coaching style in order to be effective. One coach described adaptability as such:

"Where in our sport it's different, a distance runner is way different than a sprinter, light years different. You have to deal with that differently as a leader. When you're addressing the whole team you have to be aware of that and when I am communicating to a thrower versus a distance runner, how I talk to them is completely different and what motivates them and so it is a very unique sport in that way, that you have to tailor that...So if you are going to be a good coach you really have to be able to change it on the move, non-stop, especially within track cause you know there are not enough coaches and you have coaches coaching so many different events, in a matter of five minutes you are dealing with three or four different personalities and it's just a very unique situation."

PASSION AND LIFESTYLE BALANCE

Coaches related that their passion to coach was driven by a desire to "positively impact" others and to "bring out the best" in their athletes. One coach commented on his passion as such:

"Because I loved kids, I loved coaching. I discovered that that was what I loved about coaching, it wasn't high

jump, or 1-3-1's or 2-1-2's, it was the kids, the player, the athlete."

In light of the coach-athlete commitment that their profession demands, some coaches expressed the need for balance in their lives, particularly with regard to their relationships with family and friends. Coaches frequently mentioned the difficulty of time management in dealing with a large number of individuals and trying to honor their commitment to each person. The coaches discussed the importance of their families and the support they provided them in pursuing their careers and their passion for helping others through coaching track and field. The coaches also mentioned the difficulty of balancing their commitments of time and energy and they often struggled to find a healthy way to be an effective leader while also finding time for self care. One coach put balance in this perspective:

"I think there is a line because people might be overly committed and ineffective, but I think there has to be a time where you know it's still a job, for me there is a gray area between where it's my life and my job. Being committed means, I am committed to this, but I am also committed to taking care of myself so I can stay committed to this. I think a lot of people burn out and get beat up from this because they don't keep that line there, they don't take vacations, they don't go home at 6 o'clock, they don't take Sunday off."

COACHING DEVELOPMENT

Coaches' comments illustrated the pursuit of knowledge and expertise in the area of coaching through multiple factors, such as mentoring, parental influence, experiences throughout their career, establishing a knowledge base and the need for continuing education. Coaches' career paths varied but followed a progression through the different levels of coaching on the way to becoming a head coach. The majority of the coaches were high school track and field coaches; several were graduate assistant coaches at universities, others undergraduate student intern coaches and all of them were assistant coaches before becoming a head coach.

Personal characteristics exhibited by the coaches in this study were characterized by a desire to continue to grow as a coach by learning, a continual involvement and maturation through experience, and a constant evaluation of their own development. Many coaches learned the elements of effective coaching through a combination of apprenticeships or mentoring opportunities, formal education in physical education and kinesiology, networking with other high level coaches, and sport science and coaching education programs.

The importance of mentoring was identified as a key component in the coach development process by the





majority of coaches. One coach summarized it:

"I think it is important, because that is why I am sitting here, because I had great mentors. It's not about the technical stuff, it's more about how to interact with the athletes and how to lead them and get them to believe in themselves."

**COACHING CONSIDERATIONS
GENDER DIFFERENCES**

Gender differences within coaching is a topic that is often overlooked and less discussed but is one that does exist and is important to consider as a coach. The majority of coaches interviewed for this study recognized that gender differences among track and field athletes do exist. Specifically, coaches mentioned that women are more sensitive emotionally; while these comments mainly came from male coaches, one female coached shared this viewpoint as well. The other two female coaches acknowledged that both men and women were emotion-

ally sensitive.

Four coaches (two male and two female) indicated that women tend to react in many different situations by expressing their feelings through crying. Three coaches (one female) also commented that women tend to be tougher in that they can typically handle more volume in training and are more willing to do extra work. In regards to men, both male and female coaches stated that men are less receptive to feedback and are less sensitive in how they respond to feedback.

"In many cases with a man, you can chew him out and an hour later you can go over and put your arm around him and move on and forward and I have noticed women it does not quite work that way, it's not quite that clean and simple. You have to be a little more diplomatic," said one male coach.

"In general guys question things a lot more than women do. Women are more likely to just do what the coach says and see what happens and if it is not successful, they might ask why. Men are like what is this for? Why are we doing this? They really want to know," said one female coach.

TEAM AND SOCIAL COHESION

The majority of the coaches commented that team cohesion improves performance. One coach stated that "I tell our team repeatedly, especially as we are approaching a major championship scoring meet like conference, that you gain a lot of energy from your teammates." This quote exemplified a common theme among the coaches - social cohesion, or developing healthy and supportive relationships between team members, was an important positive factor in improving team performance.

Another aspect of the team cohesion and performance relationship that was identified by the coaches was staff cohesion. One coach mentioned that "As a staff we are that team and then our team looks to us and that is what I always say, we have to be a team and have to be united as a coaching staff."

INTEGRITY

All of the coaches stated that integrity was an important aspect of being a leader and most of them stated that one could not be a leader without integrity. One coach said this, "I think it's really critical. Fortunately in our program we have had a lot of success, but we have always done it the right way." Coaches identified the ability to be honest and honorable, demonstrating good character, and treating people with respect as crucial to the success of a leader.

When coaches were questioned about the current climate of collegiate track and field, about half of the coaches recognized that ethical issues, dilemmas and

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challenges exist. Specifically, six of the 10 coaches mentioned that recruiting is an area with integrity issues.

"I do see integrity issues – not a lot, but I do. I think recruiting requires integrity, recognizing the fact that someone's athletes are theirs, that they are not yours and you're not trying to persuade them to try to come or transfer, that is an integrity issue and that all starts when those 17- or 18-year-olds decided what they were going to do. They based it all on what they thought was best for them. And that is what they should do. You put your best foot forward and if somebody's situation, if another school's situation is better, that's where they are going to go because it fits them better."

SUMMARY

Some common attributes of the coaches interviewed for this study were: an athlete-centered leadership philosophy; creating a positive and safe team environment; winning in a way that promotes the idea of self-improvement and personal excellence among team members; clear, concise and open communication; a passion for helping people improve and reach their goals; an academic team focus; trustworthiness; a process orientation; adaptability; and a high level of knowledge regarding track and field and the sport sciences. Integrity is a key leadership component and sport psychology research only further supports the philosophy presented by the coaches in this study, particularly as it relates to the importance of integrity in the leadership process (Hammermeister, 2010; Hammermeister, Burton, Pickering, Chase, Westre, & Baldwin, in press; Miller, Carpenter, Fink, & Baker, 2008; Rieke, Hammermeister & Chase, 2008; Vallee & Bloom, 2005).

Coaches in this study identified the diverse nature and unique personalities of track and field athletes as a key factor in the leadership of their respective programs. The coaches discussed the need to be cognizant of these different personalities between event groups and also individuals. In order to be successful the head coach must be adaptable as a leader in order to best serve the variety of people he/she interacts with on a daily basis.

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