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Don't be a Leader Who Turns Around to Look – and Nobody is Following

By Todd Dagenais
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From time to time I am invited to speak at gatherings of various groups and organizations. Corporations are often intrigued by the inner workings of an athletic team that has demonstrated success on the field of play.

Teamwork is essential to the productivity and maximization of corporations, businesses, or the workplace. I'm invited into their world so they can peek behind the curtain into my world.

One element I include in every presentation focuses on the mistakes I made as a young leader, almost destroying my teams before they ever had a chance to taste success.

There are no standard operating procedure manuals on how to be a head coach. Someone doesn't magically become an enlightened leader by sitting in the chair placed behind a desk. There were many — and I mean *many* — mistakes I made along the way. I hope others will learn from my mistakes, examine their own leadership style, and evaluate it for potentially catastrophic flaws.

The first lesson comes from longtime Texas football coach Mack Brown. His leadership philosophy includes the "Three Cs": Care, consistent and competent.

Coming to UCF from coaching the USA Volleyball National Team and the University of Southern California, I hope my team already knew I was competent. I brought the training techniques and strategies, but deep down the team was looking for someone who cared about them, who cared about their families, and cared about the day-to-day stress they endured as student-athletes. I failed horribly at this my first two years. I was so driven on improving the team image and putting wins in the victory column that I

lost sight that I was coaching people, not volleyball. Those people don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care.

I also struggled with consistency. As a young coach, I was going through so many early career struggles on and off the court. One day I would come in energized, the next I would come in like I just lost my puppy dog. Other days I would come in stressed and take it out on the first person who crossed me. The staff and team never knew which one to expect, and therefore often walked on pins and needles until they figured out who was leading them that day. I failed to understand the importance of providing the consistent leadership our team needed to freely chase its dreams and goals. Instead, they spent that energy worrying about my mood and how it was going to affect them every day.

Next lesson: Should we deliver our message with a hammer or a pillow?

I was the ultimate taskmaster those first few years. Although it was never said, I clearly portrayed a "my way or the highway" attitude. I wasn't going to allow anyone to challenge me, and I had no room for gray area. My gym was black and white. You were either with me or you were against me.

Feedback was given with a "hammer" to make sure my rigid points of emphasis were driven home with authority. This was the worst possible leadership style. The truth is, those who use this style are insecure about their leadership ability, and use ruthlessness to mask their fear of being exposed. The moment I considered the fact my players were people first, I quickly altered my leadership style. When a message needed to be delivered, there were plenty of opportunities to deliver that message with a "pillow" instead. The resentment and complaining in the locker room decreased dramatically.

I stopped at the ATM for some cash one day last week to use on a recruiting trip. This brings me to my next leadership mistake: the bank. Every person you lead has a figurative "bank account." Every time a leader unfairly, unequally or unjustly criticizes their employee, that leader is making a withdrawal from that person's account. Eventually the account balance hits zero and the leader has lost all trust and understanding from those they lead.

I needed an eye-opening talk from my captains and coaching staff to help me realize that I needed to spend more time making deposits into my players' accounts. A phone call here, a note card there, a text message of encouragement are all ways to make deposits in a person's account. As leaders, especially as leaders with high expectations, we are

bound to make a few withdrawals along the way. This is why it's so important to make a deposit every opportunity we get.

"You are the weakest link...Goodbye." If you remember the TV game show Weakest Link, you will understand the premise of my next mistake. The game show featured contestants competing for money by rapidly answering trivia questions from a snarky woman who constantly reminded them how unintelligent and incompetent they were. The lowest score was kicked off the show until only two contestants remained.

A team is only as strong as its weakest link, as we have heard hundreds and hundreds of times. Now when I say "weakest link" I'm referring to the team member with the least amount of skill. A weakest link with attitude or effort issues must be first given an opportunity to rise up to the level of the team; if they don't, then they lose the privilege of being a part of the team.

As a coach who was all about performance, I subconsciously made the "weakest link" feel as if their insufficient skill level was a detriment to our team's success. Often, the weakest links would simply cave in and quit the team. However, the opposite was sometimes true. Our team often adored the weakest link, they respected the weakest link, and they fiercely defended the weakest link. Worse yet, after seeing what happens to the weakest link, deep down they would worry about becoming the next weakest link. These fears built up a significant amount of anxiety and fear among our players. Anxiety and fear will undermine any leader. By singling out the weakest link, I created a significant morale issue.

To address and make this change, I started creating opportunities to allow the weakest link to shine in public. While their skill level wouldn't help us on the court, their unselfishness could have a huge impact on our program. Sometime we have these players represent our entire program at a community function. Sometimes we would name them as a chair for a team committee, or plan a team function. Anything we could do to allow these players to be successful in the eyes of the coaching staff and teammates were opportunities to elevate the back end of our roster, instead of constantly alienating them. Again, this practice improved team moral significantly.

Lastly, sometimes a leader has to stand in the spotlight and "take a bullet." I would find myself criticizing our setter when the offense was sluggish, or our blocking when a team was scoring at will. I can look back and see old news conferences where I would throw a

player or two under the bus, because I didn't want anyone to think the team was ill prepared by the coaching staff — namely me. A good leader will stand up to the scrutiny and say “we” need to be better or “I need to do a better job” of putting my team in a position to be successful.

Don't be afraid to admit you were wrong as a leader. Don't be afraid to show vulnerability to those you lead. You can still be open and vulnerable while providing the vision your team follows, the structure they need to hold them up, and the community action they need to feel like an important part of the group.

Examine yourself to see if you are a leader that puts people first. Are you allowing them to have fun? What are you doing to make them feel invested? How can you find ways where they can help steer the direction of your team.

As a leader, I was far from perfect. I still make leadership errors. Showing that you are competent isn't enough; you must be consistent and you must care.

If you don't, the balance sheet will eventually hit zero. You will suddenly find yourself walking your vision down a pathway, but when you turn around to look, nobody will be following you.

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