

75. Military Leadership for Athletic Teams

The following chapter features an interview with Lt. Colonel JC Glick, former head of the Army Ranger Leadership Development School. He is now a leadership consultant for business and athletic teams.

How did your experience in the military impact your leadership philosophy? What specific concepts have you been able to transfer to your work with athletic teams that have had the most positive impact on performance?

In the military we wanted to provide our people the freedom to make decisions that were correct for the situation, we wanted to put our people through exercises that didn't micro manage them, but instead prepared them to take the next step in combat. We did that by putting them in pressure situations where they had to make fast decisions. We would allow them to go through the decision-making process and adapt to those choices, learning from the good choices and the bad equally.

We believe that if you teach them how to think instead of what to think, they will get used to thinking for themselves instead of waiting for someone else to tell them what to do. Much like the goal of a military leader is to create future military leaders, that not only are as good as they are, but better, I would say that the goal of a head coach is to create more head coaches. You also want your players to be extensions of your coaching on the field, not automatons that just do what you say when you say it, but read, think and act as a coach would. You want them to execute and process situations quickly instead of having to read and react.

How does that look like in real life? You give them guidance and instruction and then prepare them to execute on their own. Questions to ask players to think for themselves include: "What did you see out there?"; "What is the other team doing?"; "If they do this again, what do you think we should do?". Those questions don't demonstrate weakness; quite the opposite is true. Those questions demonstrate confidence in you and your players.

I can draw parallels to fighting the enemy overseas. I wanted my team to describe the current status of any given situation they were dealing with at the present moment, and then be able to act correctly without my direct order. On the field coaches may ask their athletes to have "situational awareness" think it is the same to what I just described, but there is a difference between "situational awareness" and "situational understanding". Situational awareness is about knowing what is going on around you – situational understanding is knowing what is going on around you, knowing what it means, and knowing what to do about it. This is what we want as leaders.

If they didn't know what to do in a given situation, what did that mean to them and me? Two questions for both athletes and soldiers: "So what is our situation?" "What do we need to do next?" We wanted them to be adaptive and to solve their own problems.

Defining the culture. Making a culture deliberate. How can sports teams accomplish this? What are the primary roles for the coach and athlete to make this a reality?

Great cultures are built from the people up and then driven from the top down. The team should set the core values in context and the coach should make sure they and their players are living by those values.

It's important to avoid what I call 'bumper sticker leadership'. For example, a team may have a statement in the locker room that says, "Work hard every day." This isn't well defined and people from different backgrounds and experiences will look at hard work differently. There are competing ideas to what this means. So, it's crucial to define specific parameters of hard work means to the majority of your team. This context matters so everyone knows how to live by the values they establish.

Also, it's important to note that some of the players who may offer the most "push back" can also be some of your higher aspiration team leaders. They may have specific ideas on how things should operate, and when you give them a voice in the development of culture, they don't need to "buy-in"; it is their thoughts so they are "in" already". To get more buy in, ask the athletes what they want. Also, ask them how negative actions by themselves or another player, or by you as the leader, impacts the entire team. Get them to think through how actions have a cause and affect on culture.

Come up with a culture statement. Who are we as an organization? This can be specific and generic at the same time.

Example: With the Rangers, we have something called The Ranger Creed. In this creed there are Ranger values, in context, that are both specific enough to tell you what your actions should be, but generic enough to have multiple applications. A line in the creed states – "Never shall I let a fallen comrade to fall into the hands of the enemy." This could mean carrying our Fallen Rangers over mountainous terrain to ensure they were safe. But it could also mean making sure someone doesn't have too many drinks and leaves the bar on time. The purpose was to look out for your brothers.

One of the rules is to, "Never lie to another ranger or officer." Sometimes you may have to lie in a given situation to protect vital information. However, you must always be totally honest with those you work and serve with.

Back to defining what hard work is. Does that mean 50 hours in the weight-room? That's obviously too much. When you ask an athlete what they think hard work looks like, they will most likely tell you (as the coach) what they think you want to hear. The key is to let them know there are no correct/incorrect answers. You can coax out an honest response using humor at times.

The key is to get players to discuss what hard work looks like. Keep in mind, an inner city kid and a kid from the suburbs might have a different ideas of what a particular value looks like, just like people from all over the world see things differently. The goal is to

get everyone in your organization to see each value the same and understand how to apply it appropriately depending on the context. Is ‘thinking’ part of hard work? Is ‘looking after your teammates best interest’ hard work? Just get players to use next level thinking to arrive at a common definition. Tell your players, “Hey, it’s ok for us to have different opinions, but as a team we all need to see it the same way, and we will come to that consensus together.”

The bottom line is that if it’s not unethical, immoral, illegal, or unsafe, you can define your own leader principles. There are many ways to arrive at a common purpose through spirited debate.

From your time as a Ranger, did you do any beneficial team building activities that work well with sports teams? Describe one or two.

With the Rangers, we always worked as part of a team, the smallest being a two-person buddy team. The goal was to force people to problem solve together. The training involved creating shared hardships we had to work through together to solve. We would get a chance to rehearse what we would do together to reach solutions and solve problems.

Example: Let’s say you have a tutor for study hall. Instead of a tutor mentoring the player, make athletes pair up and help each other out academically.

Example 2: Let’s say you have a player, maybe a walk on who really excels at understanding the playbook. Instead of having the coach spend a lot of time on the ten percent of the team who can’t seem to master what they should be doing X and O wise, have that walk on impart their knowledge to others. These guys can be like substitute coaches who can talk through everything they are seeing on the field. You may often find that more talented players can learn from less talented or walk-ons, because they feel more comfortable talking to another player instead of a coach with questions they may have.

Back to the Army. I would often have to test my Soldiers, and in some tasks the first go-round, maybe only 50 percent could pass. I would have those 50 percent teach the other half how to pass the test. When I used this method, it only took half the time for everyone to pass, instead of the full time of teaching them by myself.

Developing capacity versus having a top down culture of obedience. Can you share what a good culture versus a toxic or poor culture looks like? Can you give a few examples of what developing capacity looks like on a sports team?

It’s easy to spot a culture that isn’t working for the organization. Coaches enforce a culture of critique that often involves degrading statements toward players or athletes getting punished for the smallest reasons or mistakes.

The model for most coaches is that they will give their athletes solutions to common problems and obstacles they face. You teach them the 3 technique for example, they master it, and then you move on. That's a known solution to a known problem.

But what if an athlete is in a situation without such an easily solvable problem?

Capacity is the ability to solve a new problem when they don't have the answer readily available, or the coach there to ask. But you can't always control variables.

Example: A basketball player is taught to slide during man to man defense drills. Instead of the coach telling the players how to slide, he could take a few minutes to get the athlete to walk through how they would solve the problem for himself. A simple question like, "Where do you think the slide should come from?" , "What about the second slide?" When they do that, the athlete owns the solution, not the coach. This builds confidence and leadership capacity.

Example 2: I worked with a pro football team and a wide receiver dropped a ball in practice. The assistant coach told him to place his hands in the proper position. But this is a pro. He already knows how to make proper use of hand position. Instead, ask the player, "What just happened to cause you to drop this pass?" Usually, they could tell you something like, "I didn't get my head around fast enough." Only when the player doesn't know how to describe what went wrong then you know they need coaching. Otherwise, you are over coaching.

So, let's say a kid messes up on the field. They come to the bench and the coach will either say, "You'll get it next time", which is kind of useless praise. Or they will tell them what they need to do next time in the same situation not to make the mistake again. This is better, but the best thing to do is to ask the player, "What happened? What caused you to make the mistake?" Then they can think through that and internalize a given solution.

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