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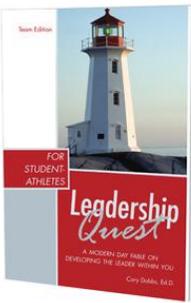
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The Enlightened Leader

Practicing Responsible Leadership

Recently the Board of Directors of a major U.S. firm fired the CEO because he “discouraged different points of view.” Bill Johnson was ousted by Duke Energy shortly after its merger with Progress Energy. The CEO of the merged company explained that the Board of Directors was dismayed by Johnson’s leadership style which they characterized as transactional and autocratic, and his inability to communicate and utilize the talents of others.

The Board concluded that Johnson’s leadership style ultimately led to inferior decisions, discouraged loyalty, and created psychosocial forces that nurtured a culture in which trust was irrelevant. The autocratic transactional leadership style practiced by Mr. Johnson is no longer considered a desired leadership style for running a company, a division, a team, or a school.

Today, empowered followers demand a relational leader that practices a mutual learning approach to leading. The new enlightened leader possesses a different mindset and skill set than the autocratic transactional style Bill Johnson displayed in his role as a leader. The standard expectation for leaders today is to create (or maintain) organizations that make people feel valued. Anything less than that is not sufficient.

Think for a moment, how many coaches would be fired if held to the standards desired by the Duke Energy Board of Directors? The point isn’t to criticize the leadership style of any single coach. Rather, it’s my contention that coaches have a great deal of influence in shaping the way in which students come to view the role of leadership. And far too often coaches miss the opportunity to coach for leadership.

In my leadership workshops with coaches, student-athletes, administrators, and professional managers, the one thing I’ve found that *all* participants agree on is that leaders should model the way. However, one realization that often takes coaches time to understand is that those that are following them observe their leadership much more than they realize. So, if a coach models transactional leadership (a traditional approach in which leader and follower behavior is an exchange—insensitive to the growth and development of one another) they are thereby teaching players that such a style is the best way to achieve the results they desire. One of the major drawbacks of this type of leadership is that it rarely prepares student-athletes for a life of leadership in a modern world that embraces relational transformational leadership. Modeling the wrong way can lead to future frustrations and disappointments for student-athletes when they enter the workforce.

There is no doubt that a coach can produce wins using primarily an autocratic transactional leadership style. However, if the coach is just trying to *take the hill* without consideration of the consequences (short-term *and long-term*) for student-athletes, they likely won’t wear well with today’s athletes. Players may take that first hill with the uncaring coach, maybe even a second. But after that, if the student-athlete sees that the coach doesn’t care about them and doesn’t respect them they’ll shut it down quickly. Poor leaders may be able to get by for a time, but over the long haul, they will create conditions that cause the performance of student-athletes to deteriorate along with their morale.

In making the case for transformational leadership—trust-based relationships and inspirational role modeling—let me step out on a limb. The problem isn’t the next generation; it’s the current generation of leaders. The next generation understands full well that leadership matters. It’s imperative that the present generation of coaches and leaders teach, train, and prepare the next generation to lead. If the current generation (yes, this includes parents!) fails to practice responsible leadership it’s going to be difficult for the next generation to fully grasp an enlightened approach to leading themselves and others. If we are to understand how our leadership affects others we need to be vigilant in understanding how we contribute to the way the next generation values leadership.

Many coaches spend countless hours mastering the nuts and bolts of their sport. However, the enlightened leader understands that the future success of their student-athletes hinges on his or her learning to contribute as a leader *and* as a follower. The enlightened leader, the coach that coaches for leadership, is aware that he or she has the opportunity to introduce student-athletes to a way of thinking about and practicing leadership that goes to the heart of what is needed today.