

What's all this Leadership by Empowerment stuff about? By Wayne Goldsmith

Leadership groups, leadership teams, player leadership teams, team councils

What's going on here? Players making decisions? Players leading? Players taking ownership of their training and playing programs? What's all this empowerment stuff about?

What does engagement mean? Is someone getting married? And what the hell is a leadership group?

I thought coaches coached, managers managed, fans cheered, doctors doctored and players played.

All of sudden every AFL, rugby, football, cricket, netball and rugby league team has embraced a player empowerment leadership model. Five years ago, most of us couldn't even spell it.

Let's have closer look at what's going on.

Leadership groups have become very popular in sporting teams over the past few years. Even the press have now become comfortable using the term "leadership group" and respect it's role in clubs and teams.

So why has it become fashionable to have a leadership group in sporting teams?

There are **several reasons** why this has happened:

1. **Society has changed.** Authoritarian dictatorships do not work anywhere in the world. Society demands engagement and people want input into the direction of their lives and community. People no longer tolerate being ordered what to do - they demand consultation and communication. Governments and business have all been forced to shift to open, transparent and accountable ways of operating. Players have grown up in this society where authoritarian models do not work - their parents have changed, their teachers have changed so accordingly, their coaches must change.
2. **It makes sense.** Players have to solve problems and make decisions on the field that determine the outcome of the game. Coaches can coach off field and at training but they have limited impact on the field in the heat of battle. Better problem solving and decision making occurs when people "own" their performance and have to take responsibility for the outcome.
3. **Players are smarter.** One impact of the Internet and the electronic literacy of players is that they have access to ideas, techniques and skills that once were hidden away in coaching education texts. Professional players are comfortable using video analysis to evaluate their own performances. Players have views and opinions about their own performances that can add real value to their coaching program.
4. **We understand leadership more.** Leadership has been studied more in the last 20 years than the Swim Suit edition of Sports Illustrated. There are millions of books about leadership from every possible angle: business leadership, financial leadership, corporate leadership, political leadership, leadership biographies - lots of people are thinking about, talking about and writing about what leadership is and how to develop it.
5. **The nature of sport has changed.** Team sports in general have become more dynamic, faster and entertaining. Most team sports have changed their laws and rules to facilitate more open, flowing, exciting competition. This means decisions need to be made quickly and players able to respond to rapidly changing playing situations. Teams with rigid, highly structured, inflexible playing systems do not do well in any code in this century. **Winning is about making quality decisions quickly and responding to opportunities faster than the opposition.**



What are the Ten (10) key elements of a successful sports leadership team:

1. **Learn to Lead.** I can call myself a Formula One Driver or the King of Persia but unless I have training and education how to drive fast or lead a nation, I will not do it very well. Leadership is the same. Just appointing or electing a group of players to a leadership role and expecting them to do it well is two steps short of insanity. You would not give them a ball and say “OK - now you’re a talented player” without coaching, education, teaching, training, practice, feedback and development. Great leadership groups have been trained and educated how to lead.
2. **Real power!** Some coaches “talk-the-talk” about empowerment and engagement and players owning decisions but when push comes to shove, they take the power off the leadership group. The essence of great leadership is taking responsibility for decisions and turning decisions into actions. By giving a leadership group limited power to make decisions and taking it off them as soon as the team is under pressure takes away any sense of responsibility: the group is a leadership group in name only.
3. **Consistency.** The same rules must apply to the Leadership group as apply to the rest of the team. People do not tolerate double standards or inequity in teams. Everyone plays by the same rules or there can be no trust - and without trust, teams do not succeed.
4. **Real meaningful decisions.** Some Clubs allow the Leadership group to make decisions about jersey colors, where the team will go at the end of season holiday, what food to eat at the Annual Presentation Dinner and not much else. Teach the leadership group to lead, and trust them to make significant decisions, to own them and to implement them. And, to be held accountable for them!
5. **Responsibility and accountability.** Responsibility and accountability. Responsibility and accountability. Are you getting the idea yet?
6. **Honest, regular feedback.** Athletes grow from receiving honest, regular feedback. Leaders grow the same way. Provide opportunity for leaders to give and receive honest feedback from their peers, their team mates, coaches, staff and management. And don’t be afraid of conflict. People who trust each other can give honest feedback and learn, grow and improve through vigorous (even heated) debate.
7. **Flexibility.** The old models of leadership were based on hierarchy and rigid vertical structures. Modern leadership is based on flexibility and dynamics which respond to changing needs and circumstances. The leadership group should be a dynamic, living group which is comfortable responding to whatever challenges it confronts.
8. **Communication.** Leaders must communicate but listen ten times more than they talk. Leaders who listen and respect and care about the views of the people they represent are the greatest of all leaders.
9. **Start ’em young.** Just as you would not wait until a player was 25 to teach them how to kick, pass, run, jump etc., if you want leaders - train ’em young. Ensure your elite player development program has a significant, well structured leadership development program as an integral aspect.
10. **The Culture Virus** - Culture changes and grows from the inside out. Provide systems, structures and opportunities for the leadership team to “infect” the rest of the team with a winning culture and positive attitudes.

So enjoy the “new” leadership. Help players learn to lead, provide them with the environment and opportunity to evolve into quality leaders and your team, the players, the Club and the sport will all benefit.

Wayne Goldsmith

