



National Soccer Coaches Association of America

Letting Assistants Lead

Head coaches who delegate responsibility build trust and confidence

By Amanda Vandervort and Michele O'Brien

Do coaches lead more than just our players? We often speak of our players as leaders, or our ability as coaches to lead our team -- but what about our ability as coaches to lead one another? How important is leadership within a coaching staff, and what does the leadership that your staff exhibits ultimately mean for the players on your team?

For coaches to be effective leaders, we must first possess and demonstrate the qualities we are trying to incorporate in our teams. As we search to find the strengths in each of our players and promote them on the pitch, we also should seek out the strengths of our assistant coaches and encourage them on the sidelines. Doing so will not only allow our soccer programs to develop to their full potential, it also will provide our players the opportunity to see, process and evaluate leadership to they may apply it to their own experiences.

U.S. Women's National Team Staff coach Stephanie Gabbert says, "Coaches by their very nature have a desire to lead. It is important for head coaches to recognize that in their assistants and to provide them with opportunities to lead as well as to improve their leadership abilities."

When players see that their head coach has stepped aside and given his or her assistant a "lead" role, they will begin to see important aspects of leadership including trust, instilling confidence and giving guidance without interference.

"For players on teams who have the desire to fulfill a leadership role, this can be an important part of the process," Gabbert says.

Each coach brings a unique skill set into his or her program, and finding valuable roles for the members of the coaching staff aids in their individual development. Moreover, players appreciate passion and strength, and subtle guidance may be enough to encourage them to take leadership roles themselves. Noel King, manager of the Republic of Ireland Women's National Team, reminds us, "Today's players are tomorrow's coaches."

Tracey Ranieri, the women's coach at Oneonta State and the 2003 NSCAA/adidas NCAA Division III Women's National Coach of the Year, says, "Just as our players have different strengths and weaknesses, so do we as coaches. As a group of leaders we need to keep the lines of communication open and always remind ourselves of our mission and philosophy while working toward the same end goals."

Ranieri continues to say that we define coaches' roles with the understanding that, just as a team grows and develops through the season, so will we as coaches. Players shift positions and coaches find ways to better help the team. "It is all a process and I believe those finite changes are very positive for your team to see."

Delegating responsibilities makes organizational sense and promotes trust, confidence and loyalty within your staff. Discover each coach's strength and allow that to shape his or her job description.

Sue Ryan, who is in her 19th year as the women's coach at Stony Brook University, says each person on her staff has a

strong leadership role in their area of expertise.

"For example, I have a co-coach who has far better computer skills than I have," Ryan says. "She mentors me in this area. I have a second co-coach who has a greater understanding of video analysis. He leads this area and mentors us. I believe this system works well to empower all the people on the staff and spread ownership of commitment to our common goals."

Anne Moore, women's coach at the University of Wyoming and the 2003 Mountain West Conference Coach of the Year, gives her assistant coaches job descriptions that amplify their unique strengths and personalities.

She wants both assistants to be approachable so players feel comfortable interacting and going to them with a problem.

"One assistant is definitely more of a disciplinarian," she says, "while the other is more nurturing, but those roles have been defined by their own personalities and views. I give each coach a specific job description and divide up the major workload."

David Jones recently accepted the position as women's coach at Temple University and wanted an assistant who has as much freedom to make decisions and suggestions as he or she feels fit. He sees an assistant coach as "an extension of you, not only as a coach, but as a person and representative of the university. That person must possess similar goals and attitudes towards the program. If this is not the case, it easily will be seen by everyone around, especially the players."

Gabbert recognizes that one of the most difficult things for a coach to do may be to give complete control of an important task to one of his or her assistants, and to avoid unnecessary interference along the way. She suggests being a good leader for assistants by providing relevant information to them to complete the task, being available to give guidance when necessary, being patient and understanding it won't always be perfect.

"How can you expect your players to provide leadership to each other if you can't show it among the people who are supposed to be leading them?" Gabbert asks.

As coaches grow and develop as individuals, their players will certainly respond. With this in mind, Noel King says, "players are the most important ingredient of any team, and I want my coaches to lead players to lead themselves. Like a librarian who can access the right information or a doctor who can provide a cure in times of crisis, the coach's priority, contrary to media hype, is to serve the player, not himself."

Ryan concludes, "In the end I know the final responsibility is mine and I am the one held accountable, but I truly believe that if you have talented people and allow them the freedom to do their job, they will achieve at a higher level with good guidance than if you stifle their creativity.

Editor's note: This article originally appeared in the May-June 2005 issue of Soccer Journal. A four-year standout at goalkeeper for the University of Wyoming, Amanda Vandervort spent two years coaching the position at The College of New Jersey and was head coach at New York University. Michele O'Brien serves as an assistant at Columbia University after serving in an assistant coaching capacity with the NYU program.