

Developing Your Leadership Talents

By Doug Williamson

Most people recognize the Gallup name in association with opinion polling and market research. Few people know that the most extensive part of Gallup's business is in its selection division, which includes the Gallup Leadership Institute. I had the opportunity to work in one of the programs of Gallup University. For me, one of the benefits of that work was coming to think in new ways about leadership – including the leadership role played by soccer coaches.

In the past 13 or 15 years, Gallup has undertaken a study of excellence in leadership, having interviewed more than 5,000 executives and other influential leaders across a multitude of disciplines. Involved in the study were coaches, including former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden and former Nebraska football coach Tom Osborne.

The interviews were designed to discover whether there existed any consistency of thought, feelings or behavior which could explain why, having reached positions of leadership, some persons excelled while others merely survived. From these interviews, it became apparent that leadership is not driven by issues such as race, age, gender, experience, education or executive or professional training. Any one of these variables may have some bearing on an individual's behavior, but they cannot account for much of the wide variation of leadership performance evident across the 5,000 people initially interviewed.

Therefore, there must be other variables at work. Three stand out as most compelling:

- **The talent of the leader:** "Talent" in this case means the way the individual makes sense of the world and the way that perspective then impacts his or her moment-by-moment behavior.
- **The leader's ability to manage others' perceptions:** A leader can lead only if he/she understands how he/she is being perceived by followers. These perceptions drive the behavior of those following and, therefore, must be an important focus for the successful leader. This is quite true for coaches. The saying "people don't care what you know until they know that you care" is an example of this.
- **The leader's self-awareness:** Of the three, this factor may be the most significant. When asked what experiences prepared them for the demands of leadership, the most talented leaders stated "knowledge of self," not education, not experience, not even monitoring or mentoring.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that "self-trust is the first secret of success." Although it may seem audacious to disagree, even slightly, with an American literary icon, I am going to do just that, because I have come to believe that we cannot trust ourselves until we truly know ourselves and until we truly know where our strengths lie. Self-knowledge, then, precedes self-trust as the first secret of success in leadership.

This is precisely what Gallup found in its ongoing study of influential leaders. The best of them all stated that they devoted considerable time to self-reflection, which produced increasing awareness of who they are as leaders –their dominant, predictable strengths, their trailing edges or blind spots, and all points in between. This is a difficult task in a busy world, especially for soccer coaches.

All of these leaders had disciplined themselves to understand the power and limitations of their particular style. Significantly, they did not use their "knowledge of self" to bolster their trailing

edges; being well-rounded was not their goal. Rather, they sought to build on dominant strengths while pursuing other strategies that might make their weaknesses irrelevant.

The most important of such strategies was complementary partnering. Talented leaders did not try to play all the roles themselves. Rather, they were aware of all the leadership roles that must be played, aware of the roles they played best and aware of the type of lieutenants they needed.

Talented leaders did not try to hide blind spots from others while working on self-improvement with books, seminars and training classes. Rather, they readily confessed such blind spots so they could be freed up to leverage their strengths and simultaneously build a well-balanced team around them. This “knowledge of self” engendered a unique developmental approach – an approach leading not only to greater productivity and efficiency, but also to less defensiveness, less protectionism, less delusion and perhaps even greater maturity.

There are some basic elements on which to build success in leadership:

Belief in talent - Genius is often one or two talents maximized. The most important ingredient in the success of any human endeavor, including leadership, is talent. Following are the talents of outstanding leaders:

Great leaders provide clear, consistent direction. They:

- create a vision and strategic direction.
- see the big picture.
- conceptualize the process and the issues and allow for contingencies.
- focus their associates on clear, consistent goals.
- are goal-oriented and have the ability to make corrections.

Outstanding leaders drive results. They are:

- highly-motivated, intense and achievement-oriented.
- ego-driven, with the thought “I can do this.”
- competitive – they want to win.
- persistent in the face of obstacles, sell their ideas and drive performance.
- courageous and will battle when convinced they are right.
- courageous enough to lead.
- activators.
- willing to let others achieve.

The best leaders maximize their human resources. They:

- relate to associates to build teamwork and support.
- connect at a deep, personal level.
- are multi-relaters – they can meet a lot of people and connect with all.
- have individualized perception; that is, they treat everyone as an individual.
- develop people to meet future challenges.
- take joy in watching someone improve and move on.
- create a climate conducive to partnership and growth.

Effective leaders are performance-oriented. They:

- are responsible and ethical.

- help individuals grow as people.
- are arrangers.
- have the ability to coordinate matters.
- have the ability to get people to work together as a team.
- are strategic thinkers and have strategies ready when plans are blocked.

Effective leaders manage systems. They:

- are objective and astute in understanding the financials.
- can create lean, effective organizations that maximize individual impact.
- are administratively effective, well-organized and disciplined in their approach to work.

But outstanding leaders are not all alike. Each leads from his/her individual talents and strengths.

Focus on excellence - There is no excellence without recognition. In the NSCAA State Diploma course, we recommend that coaches working with young players “recognize every measurable bit of improvement” to facilitate the learning process. The key: praise recognition when deserved – it can never be excessive.

Move from strength - People develop best in areas of strength and change least in areas of non-talent. In coaching, this means developing players’ strengths and helping them manage around their weaknesses. People are happiest when they get to do the things they are good at, and they learn most rapidly in these areas. Develop your strengths as a leader.

Measurement improves performance - People get better at what we can measure; we can’t manage what we can’t measure. Find ways to measure your performance as a leader and measure the growth and development of your players. Improvement can be measured. Player evaluations are helpful, as are other types of evaluations. This is more than simply wins and losses. It includes such things as team improvement, players who continue to play the game, players who graduate, etc. Successful first touches, air balls won, the percentage of correct tactical choices – all may be other measurable aspects of player performance.

Build team synergy - Build partnerships to share your strengths and support your efforts. Again, partner with talent; look for complementary talents on your coaching staff and among the team members. The best teams are not filled with “clones.” One company had eight vice-presidents who all performed as if they were the company’s CEO – they were driven to achieve. However, this left huge holes in the leadership team in terms of strategic thinking and relationships. This example is a reminder that some of our most successful and visible soccer coaches have struggled in certain contexts.

Also, build a team strategy with players. Sometimes you play a certain formation with your team because your talent pool functions best within that framework. A three front will work one year but not another. The answer: team synergy.

What Makes a Leader?

Leaders are people who can rally other people toward a goal. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in coaching and, in coaching, leaders usually “bring three things to the party”:

- **Some talent for relating.** Some people are introverted but still can relate well and build a constituency (one demand of a leader). It is crucial that we connect first with our players at the level of human beings, not at the level of athletes. Drive to execute. It can be courage or some other motivation; a call for action – “let’s do it,” “let’s go this way.” In a

- book titled "Integrity," Stephen Carter notes that to execute you need to:
- Research, study, reflect on your beliefs;
 - Act on those beliefs – speaking, doing, etc.
 - Accept the consequences of those beliefs, even if they are negative for you. This, in reality, is a definition of genuine integrity.
- **Integrity.** There may be a leader or two who doesn't bring integrity, but one needs this trait for sustainability of leadership. It is difficult to quantify what makes a great coach, but we know that coaches, like all other leaders, must accomplish certain tasks.

The best leaders meet "the seven demands of **leadership**":

I. Visioning - Visioning is talking about the future, evoking images and responses in the minds of one's constituency. If those in the constituency can formulate a picture in response, then visioning is occurring. Visioning is important. It is ongoing, people can feel it, there is a passion around it, it is inspirational. Studies of homeless people show that they've "lost their tomorrows." How many things did you help people put on their calendar for next week? Next month? What visions did your players take with them when they left school for the summer or winter break? Visioning is not static. It needs to be practiced, upwards of 15 to 20 times a day. The more vivid the vision, the more likely it will happen; therefore, leaders help people "see it, smell it." Starting **soccer** in communities and initiating college programs are concepts that require visioning. This is what Colleen Hacker did with the U.S. Women's National Team at the '99 World Cup and at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. Great examples of partnering a coaching staff in Colorado with Tony DiCicco, Lauren Gregg and Colleen all working as a team. An important part of visioning is a coach's ability to help people see it, hear it, feel it. This is part of what the best coaches do when "painting pictures" in training sessions. But remember, "Vision without action is hallucination."

There is a preparation stage for visioning. There are lots of things that we are knowledgeable about in terms of the future – trends within sports (styles, formations). John Walker's use of 4-5 strikers at Nebraska is an interesting concept. Did he have a vision about the use of that tactic? There is a need to read, study, talk to some "wackos" every once in a while, go to seminars, prepare your mind. Also we need to muse. What does it take for you to be productive of some great ideas, creative ideas? Two hours? Five hours? Gallup's Don Clifton believes every leader needs to get away by himself/herself to come up with ideas. Don't let things pull you away. This is a difficult task, especially for coaches and especially in our society.

II. Mentoring - The best leaders have a mentor and they mentor one or more other people. This is critical for success in coaching. For the leader, the key is to plug into the intelligence of another person whose philosophy seems to work for you ("I really like the way this person thinks about things"). This has been very true for me on the NSCAA national staff with Jeff Vennell, George Perry, Peter Gooding, et al. Mentors go with you even when they are not there. Alex Haley once said that his grandmother was sitting on his shoulder, talking in his ear as he wrote. Don Clifton, chairman of Gallup (a genius!), says he doesn't know if one can ever have enough experience to go it alone. At one time he sought out Peter Drucker (at \$3,000 a day) for advice. This actually was seeking out a mentor. This, in trying to decide whether to sell his company out to Touche Ross (now Deloitte & Touche). Drucker simplified things, telling Clifton, "If you get in bed with an elephant, is good intent enough?"

You'll be surprised who will talk with you if you ask. If you're going to have a mentor, you need to spend a fairly long time with that person. Who can be helpful to you in the coaching field? We also need to make a commitment to be a mentor to other people. We need to give time to other people and have a good time talking about ideas and philosophies.

Avoid sycophantism – "brown-nosing." We are vulnerable to sycophants. It is important to choose people who will challenge our ideas; sycophants also will block us out from the information we

need to lead effectively. Clifton says this is why you need anonymous surveys. This would apply to coaching in the form of player evaluations.

III. Seeking challenging experiences - We grow the most when we are in the midst of experiences that challenge us, that stretch us. We acknowledge this with regard to our players, but it is also true for us as coaches. A book that addresses this topic is "Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies," by James Collins. It talks about making claims, establishing "stretch goals." John F. Kennedy inspired the country when he talked about going to the moon. He mentioned making sacrifices, paying dues.

IV. Knowing self - We have to understand our own strengths and have the talents to develop harmonies among them. The key is to develop your talents and manage your non-talents. We turn "non-talents" into "weaknesses" by being over-concerned about them.

"You can do anything you want if you only try hard enough" is almost an immoral statement because it is not true. All of us can work a long time at something and not improve a great deal. Clifton shared a story about making a goblet in wood shop. Though he worked on it during Christmas vacation, he received a grade of 71. This was the lowest in his life. He would never be a very good goblet-maker! This demand has tremendous implications for our own leadership ability and for training players. There are a lot of things we don't need to do if we spend time doing the things we do well. It is too easy to become over-concerned with things we don't do well and lose sight of what we do well.

In seeking to identify our own talents, pay attention to six things:

- **Yearn** – "I want to do that." There are some "misyearnings." (When I was growing up I wanted to be the next Bill Russell!) Some people yearn to be coaches because of power or control. The key question: Is this an ego thing or a genuine yearning?
- **Satisfaction** – The pleasure response we get when we use our talents and see results. Clifton tells a story about Gallup's early days when he hired a bookkeeper/accountant. One day Clifton saw him smiling in his office. "What are you smiling about?" he asked. Turned out that the accountant had just "balanced." The best accountants take pleasure in "balancing." What are the comparable pleasures in coaching? Think about what gives us pleasure in coaching on a day-to-day basis. What do you enjoy most and dislike most about coaching?
- **Watch for rapid learning** – When you begin something and catch on really fast, you have a talent in that area. As a coach, do you learn easily how to teach players technically and tactically?
- **Watch for glimpses of success and perfection** – Rewards and recognition are important.
- **Total performance, "flow"** – You begin to do things intuitively, almost subconsciously.
- **Use systems like Gallup's leadership interview to help discover your own talents** – This is self-analysis that is different from a structured interview.

When you find a non-talent, there are several options:

- **Find a remedy** – It may be glasses, spell-checkers or planning books. Video is one system to help coaches who may not have strong observation skills in the midst of a game.
- **Sub-contract** – Some very creative people cannot spell. Once upon a time you employed an editor. Now use a spell-checker. An extremely successful Division I women's coach sub-contracts community relations with local businesspeople to his assistant coach (who has public relations talent) because that is not his strength.

- **Complementary partnering** – Combine your strengths with someone else’s and make your weaknesses irrelevant (Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin; the old Boston Celtics team, etc.).
- **Think about alternatives** – If you are in sales and don’t have courage as a talent, perhaps you call on “belief” or “mission” to make a sale. If you are in coaching and not a relater, rely on discipline to set up a schedule of one-on-one meetings with players that will help them feel connected to you as a coach and leader.
- **Sloughing** – Lots of things we plan we don’t need to do. Clifton talks about his non-talents in chit-chatting, teasing. He quit doing that with clients and found he could “slough” chit-chatting.

V. Making sense of experiences - The best education and growth come from learning that helps make sense of experience. This is where seminars and reading come in.

VI. Stabilizing values - Give voice to your life. Players are just like employees in a company. They will stay in a team environment that has a predictability about it. Anson Dorrance has a dictate on his North Carolina team: “No whining.” What do you as a coach do? What is acceptable on your team? The key is to express your own values. You don’t have to hit the values of all the other people. One might note that in Gallup’s poll about most admired men and women in America, Billy Graham has been on the list for 33 years. Try to create a “family atmosphere” with your team.

VII. Building a constituency - Every day is a recruiting day for any leader. Get out, meet people, develop a constituency. The best leaders are able to call on their constituencies for help in times of need. This is more than merely networking; it is connecting with people for a purpose (it does not have to be manipulative of others). This is related to areas of interest for which we need support. The NSCAA Academy is a great place to build a constituency, especially in the age of e-mail. Areas of concern for coaches might be community support, recruiting support, relationships with players, administrators, fellow coaches, captains and alumni. How do we as coaches meet the demands of leadership?

Move from strength. Consider your unique talents, the recurring themes which have contributed to your success in the past. How do these themes “measure up” to the leadership talents of the best? Accept what your talents best prepare you to be. Define the expectations. Note the unique demands of your organization, your situation and your role. What are the requirements to be met?

Consider your fit. Match your individual talents to your unique role and the seven demands of **leadership**. Where are you likely to excel? What are your blind spots?

Define an action plan. Determine the most appropriate strategy for meeting these demands. To whom will you go for support? What should you delegate? Where is your Achilles heel?

Build a constituency. Find a partner and ask for help. We are vulnerable to our blind spots only when acting alone. Consider adding partners to the team who can best support you.

Measure your performance. Set goals and measure your results. Use your results to guide you in making corrections to your development plan and your goals.

In coaching, we seem to have an increasing number of technicians and fewer educators and leaders. Can we “create” leaders? Probably not in the sense that very few non-talents can be made to grow into talents (responsibility is one of the few). We can, however, do two things:

- Build more consciously on our strengths in meeting the seven demands of leadership.
- Help fellow coaches and players leverage their strengths in striving toward success.

*Editor's note: A member of the NSCAA National Academy staff, Doug Williamson is a member of the **Soccer Journal** Editorial Board.*