



The Importance of Coaching Credibility

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“Be more concerned with your character than your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are.”

John Wooden

While searching for new ideas on coaching and leadership, I recently read an article by Nilsen and Hernez-Broome, titled “Integrity in Leadership.”¹ It was a valuable reminder of the importance of credibility and integrity for any leader or coach.

Based on research by David Campbell of the Center of Creative Leadership, the article reported that the primary quality separating the most effective and least effective leaders was credibility — defined as “being believable and worthy of trust.” Examples of credible leadership included being consistent in making decisions (even when this resulted in a short-term problem) and “walking the talk.” The results of this study of business leaders were so dramatic that the authors concluded that once a leader’s behavior caused the loss of credibility, “it is probably gone for good.”

This article reminded me of the times I have seen elite coaches lose credibility with their athletes. Talented coaches, who lose credibility with their athletes and NGBs, can never retrieve this key ingredient of coaching leadership success. The two most common examples I have seen in elite coaching are: 1) giving up on athletes, and 2) disappearing in bad times, re-appearing in good times (fair-weather coaching).

GIVING UP ON ATHLETES

Coaching at the elite level requires tremendous energy and sacrifices, often without significant rewards. When a coach’s team or individual athletes perform poorly, it is easy for a coach to question whether the sacrifices and energy required to coach are worth the commitment. This is especially true when family or other non-coaching responsibilities also are important to the coach.

Poor performance on the field can be so discouraging that a coach’s outlook can change for the worse; thinking, language and behavior can change dramatically. These changes are usually visible to other people in the coach’s environment and can become poisonous.

One Olympic coach told me that her athletes would never be internationally competitive due to disadvantages the sport faces in the U.S. Months later at the Olympic Games, an athlete in the sport said, “It’s amazing, but it is so hard to ‘get up’ for the Games, because nobody on the team thinks we can do anything here. Even our coach gave up on us after our last trip. She doesn’t even try to motivate us anymore. Why should I care? Half of my teammates are here just to go to the parties.”

When a coach gives up on athletes, they know it, and credibility and the chance to lead towards success is gone.

FAIR-WEATHER COACHING

Fair weather coaching is the act of disappearing when results are bad and paying attention to athletes when things are going well. Like giving up on the athletes, coaches under tremendous pressure and stress may find it difficult not to fall into the behavior pattern. Because of time pressures, coaches often must focus their energies on the athletes with the best chances to succeed. This is simply the nature of high pressure sport. Athletes don’t always like this aspect of elite sport, but they usually understand it. On the other hand, coaches who carry this behavior to extremes may lose credibility and the ability to lead athletes.

For example, one athlete described her feelings towards her coach after winning an international competition,

“It is pathetic. When I was performing horribly, he told me I was lazy and didn’t even know what I was working on. Now that I win, he is jumping in front of reporters to tell them that it was his program that ‘turned things around.’ It was really his assistant who worked with me when I was struggling, and we both know it. He is the same way with injured athletes, never calling them and ignoring them unless they are ready to compete. It makes you feel like a piece of meat, and it makes you want to think only about yourself.”

Giving up on athletes and extreme fair-weather coaching are coaching behaviors in and of themselves - athletes learn that “coach doesn’t care about me.” Conversely, coaches who lose credibility become quite lonely when things are going poorly. The two-way street of good will and patience that can benefit a coach with struggling performers is absent when a coach loses credibility with athletes, other coaches and administrators. A coach who loses credibility loses the chance to lead, which may lead to a loss of his/her job.

BUILDING AND MAINTAINING COACHING CREDIBILITY

Losing credibility is devastating. What can coaches do to build and maintain it? The opening quote by Coach Wooden suggests a good starting point, character; but reputation is also important. As research has indicated when it comes to leadership roles, perception (and reputation) can become reality. Many coaches in danger of losing credibility are unaware of it, because they don’t realize how they are perceived by others.

TIPS FOR COACHES WHO WANT TO MAINTAIN CREDIBILITY

- Get feedback. Do you have a feedback mechanism to get an accurate reading of how others perceive you? If not, this should be a starting point. Coaches who get over the initial fear and discomfort of soliciting feedback from coaching peers and athletes find it to be extremely useful. If you are lucky, your sport organization has a system in place, but if it doesn’t, you should start one.
- Increase consistency. “Walking the talk” is easy to say but often difficult to accomplish. One common mistake is to make a rule that is applied strictly for some athletes and less so for a star athlete. This is a classic example of the kind of inconsistency that leads to a loss of credibility. Taking an occasional short-term loss of long-term credibility is rarely a mistake. On the other hand, I have frequently advised coaches not to establish rules or expectations that they are unable to enforce. If you know that you can’t be consistent in your behavior, don’t pretend of your will lose credibility with your athletes.
- Know your strengths and weaknesses. Loss of credibility may be related to a blind spot within yourself. Coaches who understand their own motivation, personality and preferences can build an environment that helps maintain credibility. For example, a coach who thrives on constant change and new challenges might not want to preach the gospel of consistency, unless they have other people in the environment (such as a strong assistant coach) who will maintain a consistent approach.

Credibility is the key to strong leadership, and the loss of credibility is a major factor when coaches lose the ability to lead. If leading others is one of your goals as a coach, consider your credibility and determine what you need to do to build and maintain it.

1 Nilsen, D. and Hernez Broome, G. (1998), Leadership in action, 18, 2, pp13-14.

