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Team Player Personas: The Power of Identity to Get Student-Athletes to Think and Act Like a Leader

When Steven Brown was asked if he could be a team leader he wasn't quite sure how to respond. You see, Steven wasn't sure he was a leader. Most of his life revolved around simply following the dictates of his coaches (teachers and parents too). He certainly aspired to be a leader, but wasn't quite sure how to think or act like a leader. Oh sure, over the year's he'd observed players called team captains pretend to be leaders. For the most part these individuals carried out requests from the coaches. In his mind Steven never really thought of these teammates as leaders, just figureheads.

Like most student-athletes Steven had a very narrow definition of what leadership entailed. And, like most young athletes, he'd never really considered the importance of peer leadership. Rather, he simply did what his coaches told him to do. This made life simple.

However, it neglects the fostering of a broad-based progression of desired competencies. Education has as its mission, after all, the development of a person's talents and potentials as well as a role in helping one construct his or her own unique identity. At the Academy for Sport Leadership our basic proposition is that human development should be the organizing purpose for education. In earlier eras, the primary role of education was "socialization." Today, we need more sophisticated workers for a very complex world. In *A Leader in Every Locker* I argue that leadership is a competency that has largely been ignored in student-athletics. This proposition, that student-athlete are by-and-large not formally taught how to lead self, others, and with others, is based on a decade of research and practice. This is not to say that student-athlete haven't been or aren't exposed to or observe leadership behavior on a regular basis, simply that for most student-athletes formal leadership development is not a part of the actual practice of sports participation.

Of course, if someone is careful enough to make such a bold assertion, I hope they respond in kind with a way to solve the, in this case, obscure problem. I have. During the past decade of intense research I have been able to develop a very deliberate leadership development process. Seeking to fill the vacuum between what is and what can be, the assertion of *A Leader in Every Locker* answers the question of whether leaders are born or made. I'm all for making and developing leaders.

You see, leadership development is found in this simple formula:

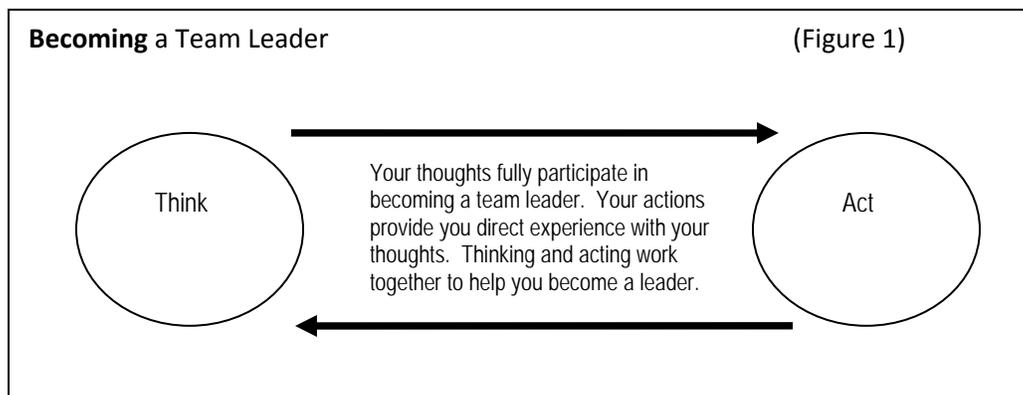
Mindset + Skill Set + Actions (situational) = output (quantitative results) and outcomes (qualitative results)

The mindset is the cognitive and emotional center of every student-athlete. The mindset contains stories, concepts, theories, beliefs, and attitudes that are used to perceive the world and to guide one’s sense-making process. It is generally accepted that thoughts drive actions. The conclusion is that a leadership mindset can and must be learned. This makes it accessible to all student-athletes.

The skill set in The Academy for Sport Leadership’s framework is best thought of as sets of skills. The five forces of building right relationships, guiding with influence, accelerating change, shaping common purpose, and focusing intentional behavior comprise the skill set necessary to lead effectively in student-athletics. Each of these sets of skills requires the willingness and ability to speak, listen, learn, relate, reason, make judgments, observations and draw conclusions. These too can be learned. And like the leadership mindset, the skill sets are accessible to all student-athletes.

Leadership is about taking action—physically, intellectually, emotionally, and socially. Actions are generally the result of the mindset—that is a student-athlete “sees” something in a particular situation that requires action and therefore takes action. Leadership for student-athletes, peer leadership, is episodic. This means that, for the most part, daily life is to a large degree managed. But when a leadership moment emerges, it becomes an episode in which the prepared leader might make a reasoned observation and draw a conclusion on what actions to take. The conclusion is that all student-athletes can be prepared to take actions, and like the world of work the actions can be exercised by those in the best position to act. For example, a nurse takes leadership action to ensure a safe operating environment while the surgeon takes leadership action regarding certain specifics of the surgical procedure.

The Academy for Sport Leadership’s leadership development formula demonstrates the reality that leadership is a talent involving cognitive, affective, and behavioral qualities. These qualities are accessible to all student-athletes.



All this isn't to suggest that "teaching" or learning leadership is easy. Rather, it is a very challenging. Recognizing the need to provide assistance in the leader development process I developed *The 8 Roles of Team Leadership*. In social psychology it is well established that social identity is a primary force in behavior. How one sees one's self matters. Tremendously.

Dobbs' 8 Roles of Team Leadership takes as its starting point the idea that leadership identity is a process of "becoming" rather than solely as a mode of "being." The 8 Roles can be thought of as persona's, each providing a conceptual lens from which the student-athlete is able to act from a sense of competence and familiarity—"I see myself in this persona." Each role is given a persona in order to give it identity and in order that it may embed in the mind as something of value. The 8 personas provide a framework for leadership development, thus going from the "being" a student-athlete to "becoming" a team leader. The personas describe major highways for journeying toward individuation—the discovery and refinement of one's unique way of becoming a leader—and also toward participation and action with teammates.

The 8 personas are found in the two, complementary but vastly different, roles embedded within each leadership domain. One student-athlete might find she is a connector, always active in finding ways to help her teammates build better relationships. Another team member might see more of herself in the persona of an enforcer, enjoying the role of enforcing the team's norms.

Leadership Domain	Activity Role Persona	Adaptive Role Persona
Physical	Grinder	Enforcer
Intellectual	Teacher	Advisor
Emotional	Energizer	Resonator
Social	Helper	Connector

No one's personality can be *completely* described in 8 role-based personas—we're all extraordinary complex beings. But the personas' do provide an accurate indicator of where a player might have potential leadership strengths, as well as highlighting areas of weakness too. Given the choice, most student-athletes are willing to devote great amounts of social energy to interacting with teammates and will, if the environment encourages it, experiment with leadership actions; actions that align with their perceived persona. One's identity is a powerful force for thinking and acting like a leader.