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Stop Cutting Corners:
Embracing the Mutual Learning Mindset

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Authors Note: *There is no shortcut to reading this article. I promise you there are no shortcuts to greatness either. Cutting corners is not a way to succeed.*

Years ago as an assistant coach in charge of developing team leaders I was struck by the willingness of our team to cut corners—literally. An example of cutting corners is helpful to glean the psychological and behavioral insights of taking short cuts.

Here goes. At prescribed times during practice we would break for a three minute interlude in which the players would shoot free-throws. The task was to shoot and make two free throws; if you missed one of the two you ran a "lap" around the court, stopping at your basket to shoot two more. During this break in action, coaches huddled to discuss the state of the practice and drills yet to come. Rarely did anyone say anything as the players shot their free throws.

One day I chose to "observe," rather than "participate" in practice. With my notebook in hand I noticed that all—and I mean each and every one—of the players cut the corners when running laps for missed free-throws.

It was obvious that the players accepted this practice as a norm. I called a halt to the free-throw shooting, directed attention to the rectangular dimensions of the court and strongly suggested a norm change. From this moment on no one was to cut corners during this simple drill.

Within a week the players had elevated the habit of *not* cutting corners; finding and addressing the many corners they previously never really thought about. What we discovered was that the issue of cutting corners is purely a psychological (emotional and social) matter, very distinguishable from physical capabilities. No doubt, every player could make the trek around the court without cutting the corners.

From this simple entreaty we applied the value of not cutting corners to everything we did as individuals and as a team. The student-athletes accepted the inherent truth that if you cut corners, no matter what the endeavor, the consequences would accumulate and at some point in the future a heavy price would be paid.

Interestingly, an unintended outcome emerged. I noticed (and noted) that our coaches consistently cut corners too.

The premise (and promise) of this article is that by developing a different mindset you can experience improved team development, player engagement, better communication, and sustainable trust. Today, coaches need a different mindset, what I call a mutual learning mindset, in order to release a team's short-term potential while maximizing the individuals' long-term generative learning. A mutual learning mindset is having the confidence and humility to go beyond fixed and inflexible leadership rules to learning, teaching, and applying leadership within the student-athlete experience.

A staple of mutual learning is the practice of learning in action. Learning "in the thick of it" requires a coach willing to engage in careful self-assessment—self-reflection if you will—of their habits of thought and action as applied to the current moment of the team experience. Such willingness often pays off in the ability of the practitioner to increase their coaching effectiveness almost immediately. However, few coaches I know take the time *during* the season to engage in healthy critical self-reflection. Rare is the coach that seeks out assessment (during the season) and is willing to openly accept feedback from other coaches, players, or administrators.

All of us have blind spots that prevent us from seeing parts of reality. So when you dismiss the value of the feedback process you are cutting corners. The idea behind performance feedback, in general, is that to grow and improve we mush shine a light (or have the light shined on us) on the things we can't see about ourselves.

At the heart of improving team performance lays the ability of the coach to reflect on what they're doing, why they're doing what they're doing, and if what they're doing is the most effective way to do things. Yet, while skilled at observing

and examining the behavior of others, most coaches, and I mean most, find it difficult to openly examine their behavior—and the thinking that leads to their behavior—on their own.   By the way, it's always easier to recognize others' mistakes than our own. So try not to cut corners here. You are a coach and coaches stand out because of their striving for excellence in self and those they lead.

While coaches often "take the blame" for losses, or consideration of "not having you prepared," and as much as one can admit it, made a "poor" decision. However, unless the "ownership" of such carefully commentated speech acts is authentic, this type of behavior often leads to the coach deluding himself into believing he is critically self-reflecting. Rather, this form of acceptance (*when insincere*) of fault as assessment is self-serving and self-protecting. Unfortunately, unless a coach is willing to learn, grow, and change, mutual learning will not happen. *(See Sidebar on The Narrative Fallacy)*

The mutual learning mindset is a cornerstone of my book *Coaching for Leadership*.   Very simply, mutual learning occurs when you seek to move others, that is your student-athletes, to the goals *you* and *they* want. The practice of a mutual learning mindset is grounded in an understanding of the following key aspects of coaching:

The Mutual Learning Leader Views the Student-Athlete Experience in a Broader Context

At the risk of venturing too far off into the philosophical realm, it is worth reflecting on the broader implications of the student-athlete experience. The mutual learning mindset views the athletic experience as a part of a broader system—the educational system. To really appreciate and understand the broader context, which by necessity, involves the future of the student-athlete; it also encompasses thinking in terms of systems, interactions, and time. The concept of a broader context implies that for the participant, athletics holds the potential

for learning valuable life skills, experiencing catalytic life events, and nourishing the physical, intellectual, emotional, and social growth and development of the student-athlete. Like an engine that requires both gas and oil in order to run, the student-athlete must have clear and meaningful goals for learning in a broader context and sufficient opportunities to cultivate leadership skills.

Unfortunately, the reality of the student-athlete experience as a component of a broader context is often a misaligned. The notion that "sports teach life skills" is nullified by short-term focus. Reflecting on my research experience, it seems too many coaches say one thing and do another when it comes to the total experience. They say the "student" comes first. Yet, if the coach truly applied a student-centric perspective then we'd see dramatically different outcomes related to individual growth and development. What most student-athletes experience is the narrower and regulated role of an athlete. That is, rather than tapping into the broader context, much of what coaches often do is construct a narrow context with an overemphasis on a host of short-term results.

Think about it this way. Let's frame the team building and leadership development process as that of building a sandbox in which student-athletes play and learn. The four sides of the sandbox are the domains in which student-athletes experience team sports—physical, intellectual, emotional, and the social aspects—determine the boundaries for learning and play. The question then becomes, which is better, a small or a large sandbox? For more than a decade now, I've been working with student-athletes and coaches from all levels on building transferable skills like leadership and teamwork intelligence. Unfortunately, the results are mixed. What I've discovered is that there are no shortcuts to expanding the sandbox (yes, enlarging the sandbox, creating a broader context, should be preferred).

To expand my research efforts I recently agreed to spend time working internally with a team on developing team leadership and teamwork intelligence. Essentially what I negotiated for was the opportunity to

create an educational system, a broader context that would effectively build leadership development into the student-athlete experience. To do this the head coach agreed to give me at least ten percent of the schedule to "teach" leadership and team development.

Right around the third week it was evident that the coach was not really willing to dedicate the minimum amount of time, energy, and resources to create a leadership growth system. He was "naturally" uncomfortable with the more abstract approach to building a broader context into his program. It just didn't mesh with his fixed mindset. The coach was all too quick to "say" he believed in the longer-term value of the student-athlete experience, but when all was said and done, he didn't want to "do" what it would take to engage the broader context.

When it comes to leadership development, shortcuts are often acceptable; coaches are willing to settling for "good enough." After a big dose of reality, this coach was satisfied with doing almost enough.

Virtually everyone that has coached has said something like "we didn't have anyone step-up and lead." Why do players step-up one season, but not the next? **Good leadership from student-athletes is not a matter of luck; it is the result of hard work, careful planning, and commitment from the coaching staff.** It requires a thorough understanding of leadership and team building to ensure that student-athletes learn, lead, and grow. Although there are no guarantees, I believe that understanding what makes a team work will naturally lead to better team leaders and team leadership.

Learning is at the heart of a mutual learning mindset. The mutual learning mindset is an expression of what Stanford University professor Carol Dweck calls a growth mindset. People with a growth mindset, Dweck explains, "thrive when they're stretching themselves." Athletes and coaches with a growth mindset find success in learning and improving, not just winning. The most noticeable characteristic of this type of leadership and learning is that it fosters a new kind of relationship between the coach

and players, and players to players. The mutual learning mindset embraces the idea that with the right mindset, players and coaches are always open to learning.

Coaches, Like the Rest of Us, are Cognitive Misers Taking Short-Cuts Without Knowing It

We are all limited and imperfect information processors. To validate this claim let me begin by describing the anatomy of a decision-making process: define the problem, identify the criteria, weight the criteria, generate alternatives, rate each alternative on each criterion, and compute the optimal decision. My guess at the probability of coaches using this decision-making process all the time is that it's very unlikely.

We are cognitive misers—often apathetic toward long-term thinking and preferring immediate results to a potential payoff sometime down the road. Rather, our "rational" thinking is more a product of rules-of-thumb (heuristics) and knee-jerk reactions (what Nobel Prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahnamen refers to as System 1 thinking that "operates automatically and quickly). Both of which are unlikely to undergo scrutiny, no matter what one states is in their very best interest.

An example of a short-cut is the seemingly absoluteness of the team captain process. I've done considerable research finding that most (close to 90%) teams default to 1-4 team captains, usually 2-3 being the norm. This research is backed up by my own anecdotal research. Wherever I go to do a leadership workshop, it's very predictable that when I ask a group of coaches how many team captains they have, they'll respond in the two to three range. Then when I ask the question "why," …well, just imagine yourself in those shoes. Someone long ago decided that two team captains is all that is needed, so everyone followed suit (taking a shortcut)—never asking why. And so the two –team-captain shortcut became a rule in the team building process.

It's not that five team captains is better than four, three better than two; rather it's the reality that too often there's no deliberate planning, implementing and sustaining of a defined leadership development program. Add to this the fact that team leadership, as I advocate for, is a broader context. A cynical coach might well argue that leaders are born, and thereby we're wasting our time "teaching" leadership and that the team is best served when only the chosen few lead. However, in practice, the role of the typical team captain is very limiting because it calls for only a few team members to play a part, while team leadership engages all team members in the learning and doing of peer-based leadership.

Here's another way to think about it. To serve only a few student-athletes denies the broader context in which you coach and players play. The student-athletes' not chosen to lead via the route of team captain should be learning about and learning to lead in their philosophy class, management class, and history class. The intellectual and social qualities of one's classwork contribute to the latticeworks of mental models they are creating in the role of a student. So while you are trying to build a culture of teamwork, don't overlook the opportunity to build leadership development into the student-athlete experience.

By now, I hope I've convinced you to stop cutting corners. The crucial decision to *coach for leadership* and to *develop a leader in every locker* can't be made without a commitment from you. Taken together, these two pillars lay the foundation for a profoundly different coaching and student-athlete experience. When you stop cutting corners, you discover that to do things right requires planning, implementing, and then sustaining change projects. To not invest head and heart in identifying the corners you might be cutting, is certain you'll meet with unexpected adversity. If you think I'm wrong, read the news tomorrow and you'll see how often people get into trouble simply by cutting corners

> *"There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root."*
> -Henry David Thoreau