



*Redefining the Practice of Team Leadership*

# LEADERSHIP INTELLIGENCE

THE EDULETTER FOR SPORT LEADERS

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## Developing The Leadership Setting

How the Learning Context Inspires Confidence, Cohesiveness, and Commitment

“Successful coaches help athletes create situations in which risk-taking is a prerequisite of high-level performance.”  
-Jerry Lynch, Creative Coaching



**NEW!**

The Academy for Sport Leadership’s Experiential Learning Activity

### Deliberate Acts of Leadership a Scrimmage! training activity

This easy to use training tool helps you to set a dynamic learning context for developing team leaders and team leadership.



It didn’t dawn on me that there might be anxieties and risk involved in team learning until I put a few work teams at a *Fortune 100* company under a microscope. To say the very least, what I observed was a wide-range of defensive and protective behaviors. Ultimately, these attitudes and actions closed off the team’s members from learning. Instead, the dysfunctions that emerged anchored the team’s collective efforts in the harbor of mediocrity.

As a result of this work I decided to take a closer look at how student-athletes learn in a team setting, and in particular how the context influences the perceived risks involved in learning to lead one’s teammates. Upon closer inspection it became obvious that many of the risks involved in team learning in the corporate world are mirrored in the athletic world. Needless to say, learning to lead in any team environment is risky business.

So, how do you get student-athletes to learn together? There are no simple answers. However, knowing that the context greatly affects learning is a step (more likely a leap) in the right direction if you’re sincere about your players learning how to lead.

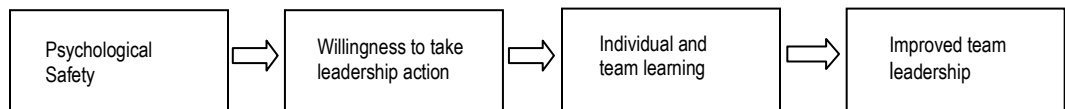
### Leadership Development and Psychological Safety

When a student-athlete takes on a leadership role it’s important to understand that he or she will learn primarily through trial and error (which is why I firmly believe in deliberate practice—scrimmage—as a way to reduce perceived risks). If a student is learning physics she will likely study and learn in private with no one aware of her mistakes. However, learning to lead teammates requires learning in front of one’s peers, and this is intimidating. The peer learning environment brings a perceived risk of appearing ignorant and incompetent in front of one’s peers.

Because most student-athletes have little experience at leading, which includes making mistakes in front of teammates, such fears as embarrassment and rejection are always present. Many student-athletes are reluctant to take action or to speak up or speak out for fear that their actions will be held against them by teammates. And this discourages young men and women from taking leadership actions.

To neutralize such fears it’s in everyone’s best interest to create a psychologically safe environment. Psychological safety is the shared understanding that the team is an environment where members will not embarrass, disrespect, disregard, or punish a teammate for taking action. All members understand that a supportive learning environment is necessary to building a psychologically safe team context.

The driving idea is that a psychologically safe team environment will produce higher performing team learning and consequently team leadership. Expressed as a formula it looks like this:



At the heart of the growth of a team leader is the leader as a learner, the learning process, and the context, which together form the cornerstone of leadership development. Always keep in mind that the team leader is engaging in learning a new mindset as well as a new skill-set. That is, the student-athlete as a team leader is undergoing a tremendous transformation and that a psychologically safe environment is fundamental to growth and development.

### Creating a Psychologically Safe Learning Environment

Years ago, the late Peter Drucker asked an elite group of executives “How many of you have deadwood in your organization?” Drucker was referring to those employees that had, for essentially retired on the job. The hand of every one of the high-profile CEOs thrust skyward. He then asked “Were they that way when you brought them into your organization?” The implication was obvious, if they were sluggards then the leader was at fault for hiring them, and if they weren’t naturally lazy then something inside the organization “caused” the employee to give up, thus becoming organizational deadwood. Of course, with rigorous hiring standards, the truth is that the employees slowly ceased to produce.

The point is that the context has a much more profound effect on how people behave than most leaders realize. The question, then, is what can you do to create a psychologically safe environment for team leaders learning to lead? The first step is to understand your team environment as it is and how it interacts with the internal achievement drive of your team leaders. To do this, use the model below.

		Low	Achievement Drive	High
Psychological Safety	High	<p><b>Comfort zone</b></p> <p>Leaders enjoy relating with teammates but don't feel particularly challenged to do the work of a high-performing team leader. Leaders are highly certain teammates have low expectations of the role of the team leader.</p>		<p><b>Learning zone</b></p> <p>Here the focus is on learning and high performance outcomes. All team members work to create a psychologically safe environment. Team leaders are highly certain that teammates will acknowledge and accept their actions as a leader. Coaches mentor team leaders.</p>
	Low	<p><b>Apathy zone</b></p> <p>Student-athletes tend to be self-centered and spend their time jockeying for a pecking order position. Cliques dominate. Laissez-faire leadership has been the model instilled based on previous team leader inactions and apathetic attitude.</p>		<p><b>Anxiety zone</b></p> <p>Ambiguity. Team leader wants to take action but doesn't know to what to do and what to expect. A psychologically unsafe environment that provokes feelings of anxiety in leader and in the team. High level of uncertainty of coach and teammate participation.</p>

Hopefully the matrix above provides a window into your current team context and how it is affecting the development of your team leaders. Psychological safety is an vital component of creating an effective learning space for you and your team. The purpose of this brief article is to provide an introduction into the practice of developing a team leader’s capacity to lead through the process of team learning. When you involve all members of the team in the learning of leadership you’re more likely to create an effective learning environment.

Let me issue a quick reminder, leadership is a social influence process of motivating team members to achieve individual and team goals and the team’s mission. As such, the norms that emerge from team member interactions will create team dynamics that build a team’s culture. Your first project as the chief architect of the team environment is to create a psychologically safe learning zone.

Ultimately, you have more to do with a team leader’s learning to lead—or not learning—than you probably thought you did. If you’re not growing team leaders, then it’s likely the problem is not the seed, it’s the soil.

