



## LEADERSHIP AND

# teamwork

Developing strong leadership and a team-first mentality is crucial to long-term success, as Adelaide's Neil Craig explains in the *AFL Record's Coaches on Coaching* series.

**'M**aximising leadership and teamwork is where the next real competitive advantage is going to come from in the football industry.

You can go and watch other clubs train and imitate their drills, but in terms of the leadership and teamwork aspects of various clubs, you can read and talk about them as much as you like, but they simply can't be copied. The selection, training and ongoing

development of leaders and teamwork can be one of the most important things a club can do – it can have a bigger long-term impact than almost any factor.

As a leader, it's vitally important that you develop a clear philosophy as this will form the basis of your decision-making, actions and behaviours. Your philosophy is your set of qualities, attitudes, values and principles; it is what you stand for and it is something you will call upon time and time again as a coach or player. If you haven't developed a clear philosophy, you become

wishy-washy, and when you are faced with tough decisions, you will tend to make choices that are either safe, political or popular.

But you do have to be open-minded as well, otherwise you become too rigid and the development of your philosophy will become stifled.

The best leaders I've observed always draw on what I call moral courage – they make the decision they believe is right. Therefore, you have got to be clear in your mind about what you are doing and why you are doing it.

Where your philosophy becomes absolutely vital from



**LEADING THE WAY:** Adelaide coach Neil Craig has clear philosophies on leadership that ultimately influence players' decision-making on game-day.

## KEYS TO COACHING

- 1 Establish a clear and evolving leadership and teamwork philosophy. It will be based on your qualities, attitudes, values and principles.
- 2 Make trust the foundation of your team environment, giving players freedom to express ideas and disagree. Remember, trust takes time to build and is about the quality of your behaviour.
- 3 Conflict and debate within the team will ensure the group is striving to achieve high performance.
- 4 Once standards of performance have been debated, it's crucial to make a commitment.
- 5 Accountability is vital – the senior coach cannot constantly monitor the group or run out on game-day, so players must take responsibility.
- 6 Leadership is about action, not position. You need to stand for something and you will ultimately be judged by what you do, not what you say.
- 7 The proof of the program will be in consistent results.

Always remember actions and behaviours; you will ultimately be judged by what you do, not what you say.

Outstanding leadership and teamwork can simply give you weight of numbers in your playing performance. The Sydney Swans have been renowned for years for the amount of game-day contributors they have; St Kilda showed on the weekend the value of weight of numbers – it's absolutely crucial on game-day.

The thing is, all coaches want to have good leadership on the field; we all talk about how we'd like good leaders and players to accept the responsibility, which leads to the big question – how can you expect it to happen if you are not training it?

You have got to give players the opportunity to be able to develop these qualities.

Exactly how you go about that will depend on your coaching philosophy. You can have a model of 'I tell, you do', which is a pretty good one to use on match-day because of the task required and the sense of urgency generated via time.

You don't have the time to sit around and talk about it, so there has got to be a degree of trust between the coaches and the playing group.

Part of my philosophy is the playing group should not have to check on everything with me before they go and do something. I'm a great believer

that the players deliver the ultimate product, not me, not the assistant coaches, not the president, not the CEO.

I have a responsibility to continually develop their leadership and teamwork – if they are to deliver the product on game-day, we need to make sure they have got the skills to do that.

I believe the majority of players are responsible, intelligent individuals; if they are not, why would you recruit them? Players are not cattle and they're not inmates running the asylum, which is what you often hear, and they're certainly not the enemy. I value players' opinions, and I want to know and understand why a player thinks a certain way.

I'm a great believer in collective wisdom and intelligence. I have at my disposal 44 elite players at our football club who have all got good ideas about football and the way we can do things better.

They have real ideas and real solutions. There are many times I don't have the answers, so I often ask the team – it's amazing how often they know the answer.

If you want me to define leadership in general terms, it is about action, not position. It is about your capacity to have a positive influence in an environment, whether it is the way things get done or your relationships with other people.

Therefore, the first requirement is that you need to build trust with the people you are working with.

I'm lucky enough to have experienced a whole range of sports in my previous life, working in the South Australian Sports Institute and the Australian Institute of Sport. I was involved with the Australian cycling team with (head coach) Charlie Walsh, and when I first started there, we were a laughing stock on the world stage. We were considered a joke.

Within five years, that same program was considered the best in the world; not because of me, but because of Charlie's leadership.

By chance, I was fortunate enough to be in an environment where I could actually sit and observe the changes that occurred in that program to go from a laughing

stock on the world stage to the best in the world.

There are common elements to any high-performance team, and the best high-performance teams in any sport or organisation have a huge amount of trust in each other. They are able to communicate from a completely open point of view, without any filters.

Trust is really about being able to put forward those opinions and debate the issues on the table – you are not trying to sabotage someone's career, but to maximise performance.

I don't want suffering obedience or artificial harmony; I want an environment where players feel secure in the knowledge they can take issue with their teammates or coaches without sabotaging their career.

So trust is the first thing and remember; trust is only built through the quality of your actions. When you have trust you get conflict, which is really important because your team is not afraid to engage in passionate debate. People don't hesitate to disagree, challenge or question, whether it be their teammates or the coaches.

**‘I'm a great believer that the players deliver the ultimate product, not me, not the assistant coaches, not the president, not the CEO’**

I've had a lot of feedback from the playing group about things they want me to stop doing as coach, because they believe it is counter-productive to our playing performance. At first I found this somewhat intimidating, but if you don't want the feedback, don't ask for it!

However, if you are going to get feedback, you don't necessarily have to action everything that comes your way, but if you react to nothing, in the end you won't get any feedback.

I've had numerous examples where the playing group has said, 'Neil, can you stop doing that, because what you're doing there is not conducive to high performance'. That's great feedback for me as a coach, and I'd rather get that information sooner than later.

It's all in the spirit of finding the best answers, discovering the truths and >>



**TRUSTING:** Neil Craig wants all his players to be accountable whether it is a senior player like Simon Goodwin (pictured with Craig) or a young rookie.

making the best decisions. Once you have had conflict, you then find you can get commitment. In other words, we've all had our opportunity to debate it, question it and put our opinion forward.

It seems to me there's something in human nature that says, provided I've had an opportunity to put my opinion forward, I'll go with whatever decision is made, even though I might not agree with it. And that's really important, the commitment, because at some stage you have got to make a decision – this is what we are going with, so I need everyone on board.

After the commitment, you are after accountability. This is the crucial area, because all too often in football clubs the senior coach

**So here's a player talking to the teammate who has taken his position in the team, and yet was still prepared to share information and intelligence to help his performance**

is seen as the person who should be accountable for everything.

The only problem with that is if you are going to rely on the senior coach as being the main source of accountability, he has got to be everywhere all the time, and that just doesn't happen.

So it's important teams that commit to decisions and standards of performance don't hesitate to hold one another accountable. I don't want to be accountable all day and every day for this team; I can't be accountable for them on game-day, because I'm not out there.

My experience tells me that

great teams don't totally rely on the senior coach as the main source of accountability for the day-to-day running of the playing side of the club.

Finally, teams that trust each other, engage in conflict, commit to decisions and hold one another accountable are likely to focus on what is best for the team – playing performance.

It's not about trying to get a position in the team, it's not about me not liking you and I'm going to do something about it – it's purely based on results, and I think that's the key in any team and leadership position.

How do you know if your leadership and teamwork philosophy is working?

One indicator I had was a couple of years ago with a player who had been omitted from the team. At half-time, I came down into the rooms and that same player was sitting with the guy who had taken his spot, giving him advice and helping him with information about the opponent he was standing.

So here's a player talking to the teammate who has taken his position in the team, and yet was still prepared to share information and intelligence to help his performance. That was the first indication to me that we were making progress with what I call 'true teamwork'.

AS TOLD TO ANDREW WALLACE

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