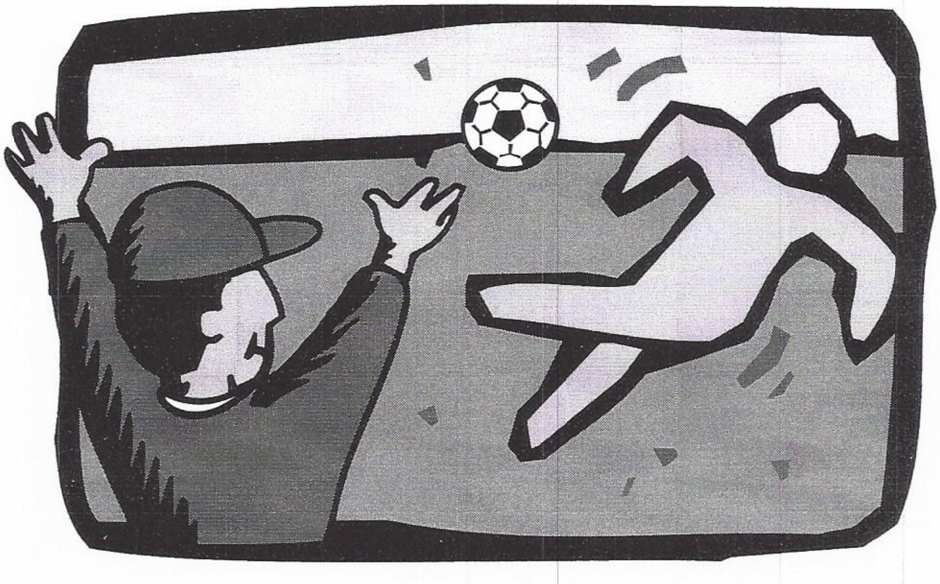


PARTNERS ON THE FIELD

Partnering for performance in coaching soccer

BY WINSOR JENKINS

(This article is the sequel to "Situational Leadership," published in the November/December, 1997 issue of Soccer Journal. Here, I continue my discussion of Ken Blanchard's Situational Leadership II model to coaching soccer with the introduction of the model's third skill, Partnering for Performance.)

Leadership is an influence process. And that definition clearly obliges us to perceive process as a key operative word. Therefore, accepting leadership as a process requires our acknowledging that a viable relationship exists between leader and follower.

Partnering for Performance provides the leader and follower with the ability to establish that relationship or partnership where, for example, they both agree on certain behaviors to get the job done. Leadership then becomes "something you do with people as opposed to something you do to people," according to Ken Blanchard. Without that understanding there can be no effective leadership.

All good relationships or partnerships are based on solid communications. Partnering for Performance represents a commitment to establish how the leader and follower will apply the Situational Leadership II (SL II) model in helping develop the follower's competence and commitment and achieve personal and organizational goals. A key issue for the leader is reaching agreement about which leadership style to use to help followers. Implementation, therefore, represents a commitment to be responsive to the needs of the follower. This includes teaching followers the SL II model!

Teaching SL II is the first step in Partnering for Performance. It represents a way to establish a common language so communication conflicts are minimized. This first step is critical because it serves as an important part of the foundation for establishing a partnership.

As a practical matter, one may question the feasibility of accomplishing this step in business or in soccer. In business, where people are considered assets to be developed, the commitment to train is considered an investment, with an expected future return. In soccer, why make the investment when a return may be hard to calculate? This may be especially true at the youth level where age and maturity limitations can interfere with comprehension. However, as players get older and move into more structured club, high school, college, and professional soccer programs, this investment is really no different than the investment made in other aspects of coaching soccer. For example, a coach is going to invest in teaching technical skills. Included here is the coach teaching his or her system of play. Unless the coach introduces a structure or framework to address the interpersonal communication aspects, however, he or she will fall short of motivating players and achieving team results. Again, this aspect of coaching represents a key process skill that a coach must address as part of his or her game plan or operating system in order to be an effective leader.

The work of a Situational Leader in business and in soccer centers on helping individual players grow and become self-reliant achievers and on ensuring that the process for producing team results is working. In managing these related tasks, the coach must establish a communications process which addresses that indispensable element in coaching people: motivation!

"Motivation represents a 'gray matter' for all of us. It is an energy that, once seen or experienced, is perhaps the ultimate intangible in helping individuals, teams, and organizations achieve results."

Motivation is a word that has come to mean all things to all people. Most people, for example, view motivation like they view quality: "they really cannot define it, but they know it when they see it!" Motivation represents a "gray matter" for all of us. It is an energy that, once seen or experienced, is perhaps the ultimate intangible in helping individuals, teams, and organizations achieve results.

Over the past 20 years, in two Fortune 500 manufacturing firms, I've worked with hundreds of people on managing others. From this I would definitely say that most people treat motivation as a mechanical process. They believe that, by doing a, b, and then c, they can motivate their employees to produce better results. Typically, many of their efforts are directed at establishing a positive working environment where people are expected to manage their own motivation. While this arrangement is commendable, it falls short in not recognizing that the relationship between leader and follower is central to the process of influencing others!

Technique is important, yes (After all, it is well recognized that goals begin behaviors.). However, "people learn–and respond to–what we are," writes Richard Farson in his highly acclaimed leadership book, *Management Of The Absurd*. In both parenthood and management, reports Farson, "it's not so much what we do as what we are that counts. What parents do deliberately appears to make little difference in the most important outcomes – whether their children grow up to be happy or unhappy, successful or unsuccessful, good or evil. There is no question that parents can and should do worthwhile things for their children, but it's what they are that will really matter; for example, whether they are sensitive and caring or cold and indifferent. Most children will adopt the characteristics that define their parents, whether their parents want them to or not. The same dynamic occurs in management and leadership."

Placing the emphasis on relationship creates a very demanding position for most individuals and organizations. This is especially true in the United States where technology (i.e., a battery of techniques, the computer, etc.) continues to make it easier for all of us to avoid the interpersonal, face to face communication so important to establishing and maintaining relationships in both our personal and professional lives. Yet we all know a manager or coach whose success is totally dependent upon his or her ability to transcend technique and deal with people on a relationship basis!

Leadership development then is not just a matter of acquired expertise. It represents a lifelong learning and educational process. Teaching others SL II represents a way to help "establish a common language, based upon common sense," to paraphrase Blanchard, so that people have the ability to establish and build relationships in their personal and professional lives.

Identifying key responsibility areas and setting SMART goals represent steps two and three, respectively, in Partnering for Performance. Both steps are important in providing structure for individuals and teams. These organizational aspects are well recognized and generally accepted practices in business and sports. In sports applications, for example, they are typically associated with a coach's system of play and the team's success (or lack thereof). Short of providing structure in soccer, individual players and the team lack the direction (parameters) needed to effectively function as a self-directed unit charged with performing the work needing to be done. Instead of having empowered players on the field, a coach can end up with chaos!

Identifying key responsibility areas is a necessary ingredient in the process of or coaching others. In soccer, this step would include determining roles on and off the field. For example, it would address responsibilities in the areas of conditioning, skill development, game (mental) preparation, communications on the field, managing goal achievement, helping others (coaching), leadership on and off the field, and the like.

Setting SMART goals is important to the process of establishing individual and team goals. The acronym SMART was first introduced in the book, *Leadership and the One Minute Manager*, co-written by Ken Blanchard, along with Patricia and Drea Zigarmi; it answers five questions:

S = SPECIFIC
What am I going to do; how will I assess results?

M = MOTIVATING
Am I motivated to achieve these results?

A = ATTAINABLE
Can I expect to achieve this goal?

R = RELEVANT
Why am I doing this?

T = TRACKABLE
How will I assess progress?

"We all know a manager or coach whose success is totally dependent upon his or her ability to transcend technique and deal with people on a relationship basis!"

Successful people are goal oriented. We see this daily, especially in sports. Managers and organizations, however, have been known to mismanage goals! Typically, the breakdown occurs when they fail to recognize the commitment to process. Once this happens, goals lose their motivational value as a tool. This is really unfortunate because goals are a valuable tool for motivating individuals and teams. To sustain or modify behavior over time, goals need managing in order to address the consequences (value) of goal achievement to the individual or team. This requires the recognition that managing goals is a process and not a one-time event.

In the 1950's, for example, when "management by objectives" (MBO) was introduced to American industry, it was well received until its application shifted from "management" by objectives–to–management by "objectives." This shift from a process orientation to something less, ended up creating skepticism on the part of both individuals and organizations. Consequently, MBO struggled to gain credibility as a viable tool in American industry.

When combined with SL II, managing goals then becomes part of an integrated process for managing or coaching individuals and teams. **Steps four through seven under Partnering for Performance, represent the commitment between the coach and follower to manage goals as a process.** These steps are described as:

(4) Assessing the follower's development level
(5) Discussing the coach's past leadership style
(6) Agreeing on a future leadership style and specifying the actions the coach will take to direct and support the follower's efforts.
(7) Following through, using the agreed-upon leadership style

Step four calls for diagnosing a follower's development level (D-level) for each goal. As you recall, this represents the first skill under the SL II model. If the coach and follower do not agree on the follower's D-level for a goal, they should initially check to see if the goal meets the SMART criteria. If so, the coach should go along with the follower's diagnosis; but interim checkpoints, with a short-term focus, should be established to review performance and ensure it is on track.

Discussing the coach's past leadership style (step five) is a way to gain clarity on how the coach can be more responsive and helpful. Here, the process invites followers to share information about how the coach can be more responsive in helping followers achieve goals. Again, the importance placed on relationship helps drive the process (emphasis on another important intangible–trust). Here, the follower should feel comfortable with providing feedback to the coach.

Agreeing on a future leadership style represents the application of the second skill under the SL II model. Included under step six is the need to specify the actions the coach will take to match up with the appropriate leadership style. What are the supportive and directive behaviors the coach will provide? This step addresses the need for the coach to understand how the functions of leadership vary from style to style.

Ken Blanchard describes the functions of leadership as: "goal setting, feedback, problem solving, and recognition." Their application varies as the coach applies the SL II model. For example, under styles S1, Directing and S2, Coaching, the coach takes the lead in all four functions. He or she is responsible for identifying desired outcomes and setting goals, observing and monitoring performance, problem solving, and providing feedback (including recognition). Under styles S3, Supporting and S4, Delegating, the follower takes the lead role in applying each of the functions. One can see from this description, "as the follower becomes less dependent on the coach and more self-reliant, the coach's role changes from providing more direction and support to less direction and support," points out Blanchard.

SL II is a development model. The goal as a coach is to help followers progress through the model's application (D1 to D4), building skills, along with gaining confidence and motivation.

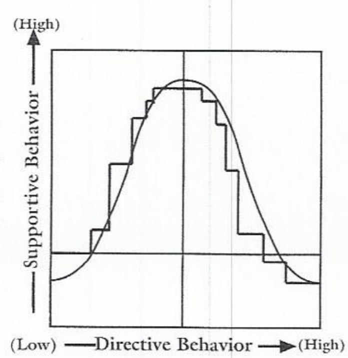
In *Leadership and the One Minute Manager*, a five step process is described for developing competence and commitment under the model's application: (1) Tell; (2) Show; (3) Let the person try; (4) Observe performance; and (5) Praise progress or redirect. The authors describe this "training" process as a series of leader behaviors which emphasize "catching people doing things right as opposed to catching people doing things wrong." This is why praising progress is included in step five as opposed to reprimanding.

"When combined with SL II, managing goals then becomes part of an integrated process for managing or coaching individuals and teams."

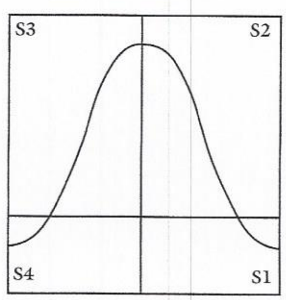
Reprimanding a follower is described as directive behavior. It represents a regressive application of the SL II model. As you recall, regression is when followers have demonstrated competence on and commitment to a goal or task, but their current performance is getting worse. Reasons for a follower's change in performance are typically associated with a drop in commitment. The reasons vary. These indicators can signal a performance problem: denials, missed deadlines, complaining, more socializing, negative attitude toward others, more last-minute efforts, inconsistent results, and absenteeism.

Reprimands are not a training tool! They are a way to deal with motivation and attitude problems. They are applied to D3's and D4's ; "people who were competent and committed but whose performance lately has not been up to par," state the authors in, *Leadership and the One Minute Manager*. However, reprimands are applied only after the coach has talked to the follower to find out his or her view of the problem. Obviously, it's better to talk first with a follower who has been a high performer rather than reprimand. Talking and asking questions represent supportive behaviors which are more appropriate when initially dealing with D3's and D4's.

Developing a follower's competence and commitment, and dealing with the regressive cycle under the model's application, both demonstrate the need to change leadership style one step or one style at a time. The model's application, suggests Blanchard, is best viewed and applied as a Stair Step Model®–illustrated as follows.



Further, treat the "lines" between the quadrants as though they were not there! As a practical matter it is difficult, if not impossible, to say where style S1 ends and where S2 begins, for example, when applying the SL II model®–as follows.



Finally, keep in mind that, while changing leadership roles, the coach always remains in the process. That is, the model calls for providing low levels of directive and supportive behaviors, at times–as opposed to none. This is in contrast to a leadership style described as abdication, where no directive and/or supportive behaviors are provided!

Following through, using the agreed-upon leadership style, represents the seventh and final step under Partnering for Performance. This is where the coach needs to "walk the talk" in applying the SL II model. In this way, he or she will be developing the ability or skill to effectively connect with–and influence followers on a relationship basis.

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