Helping Players’ Voices of Leadership Emerge

This resource stems from a question submitted to the Ask PCA blog. Responses come from our experts including PCA Trainers, who lead live group workshops for coaches, parents, administrators and student-athletes.

“Our team’s best player is also a great vocal leader, whose teammates follow him willingly. Problem is I want other voices of leadership to emerge on our team. Any ideas on how to help that along?”

PCA Response by Will Jackson, PCA Trainer–Atlanta

You have recognized an issue that many teams run into. There are several productive approaches that you might try.

First, it’s meaningful that your question references “our” team. That perspective is key to how your young leaders can be encouraged. The team belongs to everyone, including you, but especially the players. Every member of the squad claims a share of responsibility for the team’s attitude, its work ethic, its encouragement of others and team goals.

You can shape that responsibility into a culture of leadership by structuring situations at practice where every player has something to do or say for the benefit of everyone. From one day to the next, it may involve helping with equipment, setting a practice goal for the day, or working in a buddy system for stronger players to help teammates with a particular skill. Leadership is a learned trait, so coaches must be proactive teachers, who create opportunities for that worthy skill in our athletes.

You’re fortunate that your best player is also a fine leader. If he’s mature enough to handle it, talk with him privately about how he can encourage the growing leadership of his teammates. His willingness to also be a trusted follower of others on the team will reinforce their confidence in speaking up and becoming their own good models for hustle and team play.

Jack Clark, super-successful rugby coach at the University of California, describes leadership on his teams in a special way: it’s “the ability to make those around you better. This is accessible to everyone – not just the most charismatic or the best player. It’s a requirement on our team that every player possess some leadership and try to make those around him better.”

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PCA Trainer Will Jackson played football for Davidson College and taught psychology and coached football, baseball, wrestling, track and basketball in Atlanta-area high schools until his retirement. Most prominently, he served as head football coach and Athletic Director at Dunwoody HS near Atlanta and at Wesleyan School in Norcross. In retirement, he still assistant coaches varsity football at Wesleyan.