

Leadership

One of the most valuable skills that can be developed through playing rugby is the ability to lead others under pressure, an attribute that can be transferred readily to life and careers outside the sport. Prospective employers typically see such leadership ability as a big plus point when considering taking on someone who nevertheless may have limited work experience to offer.

Some folk are more inclined to lead than others, by nature and early life experiences, but as with any other skill, talent can be developed

Understanding leadership

Similarly, the key qualities that followers value in their leader may vary considerably according to the situation: for example, clear-minded autocracy may be just what is wanted; or humble consensus building may be more appropriate. And the tasks involved in leading an operational team are rather different to the strategic challenges facing a Board.

Leadership & Management by degrees

Dr Guy Brown comments “our strong partnership with the RPA, Player Development Managers and clubs ensures we keep the programme relevant to the leadership and management development needs of players. Players are leading on the pitch every day, and our role is to transfer those skills into university assignments and further enhance the way they perform both now and for their future careers.”

Getting feedback could be through a formal '360 degree' process if such is in operation and /or by seeking informal input from your colleagues. You are probably already doing this to a degree! Think of 'banter': it's informal feedback, though perhaps not channelled in the most productive way. You may well anticipate that feedback anyway, by virtue of observing the impact you have on others, which observation skills are important to hone in order to develop your 'emotional intelligence' (being better aware of how others are feeling). And you may be lucky enough to have a coach who makes a point of coaching your leadership skills as well as rugby skills.

It is important to use this gift of feedback, by reflecting on this information and determining the changes you should make to improve. In my work with athletes and others I recommend that they write a formal Personal Leader Development Plan to commit to writing the changes they will make and to keep track of progress.

Planning to improve

A simple Personal Leader Development Plan should cover

What have you learned are your strengths & weaknesses?

What will you focus on to improve?

What changes will you make in the next 100 days?

How will you know if there's an improvement?

Who will help you improve?

What barriers will you have to overcome?

...and be updated every 100 days.

Studies show that the most contented, successful and highly perceived people are those who most closely align: how they see themselves; how they want to be seen; how others see them. Clear authenticity is at the heart of good leader behaviours.



Practising for real

There's the old debate about whether leaders are born or made. Well, as with any talent, a natural bent will help, as will the positive experiences in childhood and youth; what will then make a massive difference in developing leadership skills, as with ball skills, is the application through practice of the know-how obtained from understanding the basics, enriched with self-awareness.

In his seminal work *Outliers: the story of success*, Malcolm Gladwell established the '10,000 hours' rule for the amount of practice required to be a success in any field. This may be a gross simplification, but it applies to leadership where 'practice, practice, practice' is the mantra to achieve success. Of course, practice should be guided by a plan to improve, as described above

The good news here, is that as a professional rugby player you have more of an opportunity than most of your peers in suits to practice leadership behaviours, particularly under the pressurised match-day conditions and in every-day training, with the advantage of instant feedback through observation and colleagues' reactions. Many people in business would see these circumstances as ideal for developing leader skills, and so they will value them as one of the great assets you might bring to their organisation.

Coaching to lead

When RPA Member Paul Hodgson was in his early 20s, he decided that he wanted to stay in the game and identified coaching for his post-playing career. He took on some challenging coaching roles in top community clubs to fast-track his experience, and further accelerated his progress with the establishment of his own summer Rugby Camps. It was through these experiences that he came to recognise the power of working through a group of coaches to achieve the development of 50-60 young players at a time, which in turn confirmed to him how important it is for a coach to hold excellent leadership skills.

So Paul set about testing and developing his leader skills within his playing environment as well as through his coaching, and subsequently enrolled on the Northumbria Leadership & Management degree course,

recently gaining a First Class Honours. This has provided him with a rounded understanding of leadership in many contexts and enabled him to identify his further development needs. Retiring from playing last season, Paul took on the role of Academy Backs Coach at London Irish, where he has put his leadership learning to good use in developing the Academy members as people as well as players and in implementing changes to Academy ways of working.

Now armed with a Personal Leader Development Plan, Paul is getting regular effective feedback on his leadership from Director of Academy, Nick Kennedy, and from two mentors he uses, one from in the game and one from outside, to obtain a range of valuable perspectives to aid his continued development as a leader.

Communicating your capability

A skill that is fundamental in leadership is communication, and of course we value clear and timely communication in the match. Clarity and engagement are no less important when it comes to convincing future employers of your leadership capability. Being able to articulate the generic key features of successful leadership, how you have developed as a leader, and where you believe you could apply those skills in the future to great effect, would single you out in job interviews. Research into employers' responses generally to a sports person's job applications leads me to believe that few elite athletes make the most of their leadership experience in this way.

So, applying the principles I've set out above could well be a really good investment of your time now, leading to a new career after rugby into which you can transfer those well-honed skills. Practising your leadership will bring a human dimension to the fore in an increasingly technology-driven and statistics-focused environment.

And indeed, of course, making a conscious effort to develop those leader skills now could well have a substantial impact on your value as a player and your contribution to a better team performances today!



Vic Luck is Chair of the Management Board of The RPA and a Director of The Foundation for Leadership through Sport (www.flfsport.net), a charity set up to encourage and facilitate athletes, coaches and sports executives to develop their leadership capability and that of the organisations they serve. In that role he works with rugby players and others as a leadership coach

Previously head of PwC's

15,000-person consultancy business in the UK & Europe, he has specialised in organisational effectiveness and leadership for most of his 50 year business career, which additionally has involved senior leader roles in IBM, Chrysler and the public sector, experience that he is now applying to sport.