





SOFTBALL ACADEMY

with Mitch Alexander

Leadership Matters

The following chart came across my Facebook feed the other day. I have many softball-related feeds and when I read the first line, I assumed this chart came from one of them. I thought the chart referred to the best attributes of softball coaches. I didn't initially see the name of the person who posted it, as it was a shared post. As I skimmed down the chart, I agreed with the content and thought about how we coach our team compared to some other teams I am aware of. I was confident that we are

	Difference Between	
<u>Boss</u>	&	<u>Leader</u>
Drives people		...Coaches them
Depends on authority		...On goodwill
Inspires fear		...Generates enthusiasm
Says, "I"		...Says, "We"
Places blame for the breakdown		...Fixes the breakdown
Knows how it's done		...Shows how it's done
Uses people		...Develops people
Takes credit		...Gives credit
Commands		...Asks
Says, "Go"		...Says, "Let's go"

viewed as leaders, while coaches from many other local organizations are viewed as bosses. I eventually looked at who posted the chart and it was from a friend who is not involved in softball at all, but rather it was a business management post!

This got me thinking about how the qualities of a good leader transcend purpose and organizations – the qualities are the same or at the least very similar and related. The Oxford Dictionary defines a leader as, “The person who leads or commands a group, organization, or country.” A good boss is a good leader. A good officer in the military is a good leader. A good head coach is a good leader. All good leaders have the confidence, charisma, and people skills that make their charges (employees/soldiers/players) want to perform well. The reverse, however is not true; a good leader may not be a good boss, officer, or head coach. Therefore, leadership is just one of several attributes that are required to be a good boss/officer/head coach – but it’s a very important one.

A good leader partners with their followers and asks them to do something only after they have been adequately coached and developed. A good leader wouldn’t ask a player who never slap hit to get up to the plate and attempt a slap. That’s a formula for failure. A good leader would explain a critical situation to a player and only ask them to do something they are prepared to do. “Emily. The game is on the line here. This batter has fouled off the last 5 pitches you’ve thrown. We’ve worked on your curve ball for the past 6 months. You’ve really come a long way with it and you’re ready to use it. I believe in you. You can do it. I think this batter will chase your curve ball. Can you throw it for me today and get this last strike out we need?”

Players trust good leaders because they have confidence that the coach

will do the right thing. The good leader has earned this trust over time. They don't rely on authority to motivate the players. They rely on good will and respect. "Sure Coach. If that's the pitch you want, I will throw it." This good leader builds and fosters enthusiasm in their players. We've all seen or heard of coaches who rule by fear. "You miss the next grounder and you're sitting for the rest of the game and the next one too. I'll put someone in who can handle the position." You can see that this type of coach uses fear to lead and quickly assigns blame for the fielding error. The coach most likely never even thought that the backhand jam step required to field that hard ground ball had never been taught and worked on in practice.

The worst kind of leaders are ones who know it all but can't show you HOW to do something. This of course is true for coaches too. I am especially amazed when coaches shout batting commands at a player. They know the words, but don't know the how's or why's. They can't show their player what they need to do. Instead they shout things like, "throw your hands to the pitcher, keep your hands inside the ball, and stay in the zone." These are especially perplexing to younger players who have no idea what the coach is referring to!

Good leaders hardly ever take credit for their efforts. They deflect the credit to their charges. "Coach, great job today – congrats on the win!" "Thanks, the team performed very well today. Caitlin threw an amazing game. Grace made a clutch catch in centerfield and Julia's bomb over the fence were key."

Good leaders coach their charges. This is a complex, often difficult, time consuming process. It's much easier to hire/enlist/recruit top performers than it is to coach them to be this way. This goes hand-in-hand with developing people. Unfortunately, I am very aware of several

organizations who would rather recruit the best players than work on developing a player. This is especially problematic at the younger levels of 10u-14u.

Most of us know coaches with the worst leadership skills. They yell at their players. They belittle them on the field and embarrass them. They shout commands. They provide little real training. They reinforce their authority through fear. They don't develop players. They recruit the best players they can find. Once they find a better player, they drop the loyal player who was originally in that position, leaving the player (and their family) to feel they were used.

When looking for a team, pay attention to the leadership qualities of the coaching staff at the tryout or practice your daughter attends. Listen to what the coach says and more importantly, to what he or she does (or doesn't do). Do they demonstrate what they want or how to do a drill or do they just shout commands from the sidelines? Look for partnering behavior and how the players respond to the coach. Some coaches can take partnering too far and then the players don't respect their authority knowing they can step all over the coach. There is a middle ground here that is motivational while still providing a good level of authority. Coaches are role models. Ask yourself if the coaches of the prospective team are the role models you want your daughter emulating! If they are, then join. If not, it's better to find another team.

Players learn from their coaches, even if they are bad coaches, bad leaders, and don't train very much. The players learn bad behavior the same as they learn good behavior. If coaches are good leaders, players tend to learn good leadership skills. If they are poor leaders, players will learn poor leadership techniques. The same way that the leadership attributes from the chart shown above applies to bosses and coaches,

expect that if your daughter learns good leadership skills through softball, they will most likely know how to be a good leader on the playing field of life.

Mitch Alexander is the CIO for a major electronics company and coaches both Little League and Travel softball teams and is currently completing his PhD. He is a certified SUNY, ASA, and Double Goal Coach. His wife, Marie was one of the first female student athletes in the country to play Little League softball after Title IX was passed and played in the first Little League Softball World Series. Over the years, both have managed teams together and helped spark a love for softball in their student athletes. In his spare time, Mitch designs websites for fastpitch teams and businesses and can be reached at fastpitch2001@optonline.net.

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