

TED - CLEARNESS, COMMITMENT & DIALOGUE
By Johan Solinger, Professional Futsal Coach from Sweden

E-mail: hello@johansolinger.com

Phone: +46 763 69 09 70

Official website: www.johansolinger.com

Introduction

Whether I am a Foreman, executive director or futsal coach, I am the leader of a group of people who expect me to lead them towards a common goal. Upon arrival at a new association there are big hopes on me to lead them. They have expectations of me and they want to know who I am, what I want to do, why I want to do it, and not least how I want to implement my command. What I do will influence what they think of me as their boss as much as the things I do not choose to do. No matter what, why or how I act, my behavior will reflect how I am as a leader.

In such a complex, and perhaps even unfair situation that the conductor is subjected to, there is thus a huge set of requirements. Everyone has an image of the perfect boss, but despite this, no common consensus over who this person might be exists, a statement that does not make life easier for those who have a responsible role. Wadström & Ekvall (2013), for example, writes that *"In some groups, in certain situations and with certain individuals, there is a need for certain leadership behaviors and in other contexts there is a different leadership required"* (p. 33).

Although the words are soothing and demonstrate the importance of a flexible leadership, a group would hardly be satisfied with a leader who constantly change their behavior, values and motives depending on what best suits the situation. Being a dynamic chief is one thing, but to not have fixed guiding principles to work after will result in a leader with no confidence.

In this diverse landscape, it is important that a manager has a couple of principles that I follow in my daily work. The Mad Cat in the Walt Disney Productions film *Alice in Wonderland* (Banta, Connell, Cottrell, Grant, Hibler, Huemer, Kelsey, Oreb, Peet, Penner, Rinaldi, Sears, & Walbridge, 1951) responds to Alice (on the famous question which way she should go when she says it does not matter where she ends up) with the well-known reply, "Then it really does not matter which way you go." The same can be applied to leadership; If you do not know who you want to be, what you want to do and why you do it, it does not matter what, why, or how you act. To be able to lead other people you will have to come to grips with the answers to these questions, not only for your own sake to know the goal of the trip, but also to convince others that it is worth to jump aboard your ship.

Because of these reasons, it is important that I write my own leadership philosophy which I shall try to explain on the following pages.

Clearness

Before I get started, I want to make a parallel to another animated hero. Super Ted was the star of the series with the same name, a teddy bear with super powers who saved the world from various thugs. During the time that I wrote this task, I have thought a lot about this character that in many ways shaped my childhood. Super Ted was a bit of an idol. He was strong, fast and smart and clear about his commitment to justice, equal worth and what he thought was a beautiful earth to live on, but he was also kind and warm. He did not fight against the bad guys because he thought it was funny, but because it was needed, and tried, if possible, to avoid violence and instead tried to talk with his combatants in order to get them into better thoughts. Super Ted's motto was to speak first and battle later, rather than vice versa. For these simple reasons, I have chosen to call my leadership philosophy TED, which stands for clearness ("tydlighet" in Swedish), commitment ("engagemang" in Swedish) and dialogue ("dialog" in Swedish).

Clearness is a word that has gone into fashion in recent years, especially in leadership training, but are nonetheless important for a successful leadership. But what does it really mean? For me, clearness is to tell my staff in the simplest and as precisely way as possible what I expect of my team, what they expect of me and what, why and how to achieve our common goals together.

An example of this can be the meeting time for training. When will we meet? Why should we gather at this time? Where shall we meet? These questions may seem trivial, but they are easily taken for granted. My experience of being a leader, both in professional futsal as in life, is that it is better to be overexplicit than ambiguous. Do not get me wrong here, it's not about their incompetence or anything like that when I explain things in an easy way to my employees, but to give them the right conditions. In sports in general, and in futsal in particular, we tend to talk about the old truths which easily become empty phrases, which further proves that clearness is important. Often I hear coaches talking in terms like "we will work on getting a good passing game", but they rarely explain exactly what they mean by that. What is a "good pass"? Is it to do a short or long one? Passes in depth or width? Why is it so important to have a good passing game? Are there times when even the team needs to deviate from the principles of good passing game?

At the beginning of my coaching career, I ordered my teams to focus on the work with the ball. I wanted my team to have the ball as much as possible. We had a two-goal game where I wanted them to show what they had learned. It ended up with two teams that just passed the ball between each other, two teams that consistently refused to play the ball forward. I had completely failed to explain what I really meant by the work with the ball. I failed when I tried to explain how we would use this method to achieve success in our game and how we should apply it, it was clearly because they had completely misunderstood what I wanted to them to do. It may seem comical in retrospect, but the fact is that twelve training sessions had been wasted because I was not sufficiently clear from the start.

It is easy to think that clearness is about talking and nagging as much as possible, but the best way to be clear is to give instructions that are as short, specific and simple as possible. When I was a writing a document in high school, my teacher said that the best scripts can be summed up in three sentences and the same should apply regarding the clearness of roles, rules, expectations, and more for a futsal coach. If you need more than three sentences to explain the essence of what you want, maybe your idea is simply not good enough.

My role, as a coach, is to guide my players. I want them to see the same images of the game that I see from the sideline. Many coaches tend to be short-sighted and wants fast results, which often

means that the clearness will suffer. It is not an easy road to follow, I need to be both clear with my players and give them the essence of what we need to do and how, but also have patience with them. Rome was not built in one day, the same can be applied to building futsal teams.

With clearness, I think that there are two categories, methodical and expectations, which further explains the importance of being as precise as possible. To be methodical, which means that everything you do, you should do it as properly and thoroughly as possible, no matter what the case. Whether it is hitting a pass ten meters or throwing shin tape in the trash bin instead of on the floor. Why is this so important? Why cannot we just prioritize away what we do not think is so important so we can put our focus on things that we think are more vital?

It is of course good questions, however I think that we cannot just relax and switch to "power mode" when we need to. It is not an attribute we just "have", but we are our behaviors. We are our actions, and you will be judged by them as well.

The Head Coach of Sweden's national team in football / soccer, Janne Andersson, told me once that he disliked laziness and that he had had a player who continually tossed shin tape on the floor, even though there was a trash bin just a few meters away. Andersson, who eventually found it hard to be quiet about it, confronted the player. He argued that if the person in question was careless with something as simple as tossing shin tape in the trash bin, the step to cheat with a match decisive pass is not a large one. Andersson said that this behavior was contagious to other areas - Because if you cheat with the shin tape, which is such an easy thing to implement in a proper way, why would you not be careless with the winning pass, which is much harder to do right?

For my part, there is something attractive in doing something properly, because it is a behavior that is reflected in the other areas. Just like carelessness with the shin tape, it can have an opposite effect - That if I am careful with the preparations, have the proper procedures and good training, it will spill over to our futsal.

During my coach education, I had the pleasure of being drilled by Jens Gustafsson, now Head Coach of IFK Norrköping in football / soccer, and one thing etched with me and it was the accuracy of the details. I remember I was careless with a rehearsal space, which I did "about 40 long 20 meters' width," but as you can imagine, it was not exactly. Direct I received a rebuke of the mentioned Gustafsson, who said that the details matter. "It may only be a few inches of failure in training, but when you play games it will be several meters. A game situation is much faster", was his mantra that stayed with me.

Another teacher I had, Mats Altemyr, gave me a hard time when he mentioned that I had not buttoned my jacket when I coached my players in a defense session. It is of course up to discussion how important it can be, but he had an interesting point, "if you want to coach your players to have a tight and organized defense, you cannot stand on the sidelines and be sloppy in an unbuttoned jacket, that sends a mixed signal". If you are not careful with the details, the whole thing will suffer.

Another thing which I think is important are expectations. This is a word that sometimes has a negative connotation, mainly because people usually associate this with someone expects something of you. The fact is that it is impossible to run a business without expectations, how should you know what is expected of you without expectations? My experience is that a clear and

measurable expectation creates security and trust, and also a foundation for what the business is based on.

This is of course both ways. Those who work for someone need to have expectations on their leaders just like the relationship may be the opposite. There is not one way in which the ruling may set expectations, but it goes both ways. With that said, the expectations may not be the same, because we all do different tasks, but it should be as fair as possible.

Below is a selection of the expectations I have on people I work with:

ACCEPTANCE - We always show each other mutual respect and accept each other's differences

THE COLLECTIVE - The group's common goal is always greater than the individual's specific requests

ORDER – Everything we do shall we do in the most proper way possible

The above can be embodied in different ways and include various things. If we take the first point, which means that we always greet each other and say goodbye at the end of the day, no matter how much or how little we like each other. We must nevertheless work together, then it is important to meet, take each other's hand and see each other's eyes, for together we will achieve miracles. Second point is about putting himself and his own needs aside for the team's best. The last point is to always make everything as good as possible. There are no dull exercises or boring friendlies, everything should be done as thoroughly as possible. It is also what I think characterizes the behavior of a "winner", to always do your utmost in everything you do. Being concentrated on briefings, prepare properly with a good diet and sleep, wearing matching workout clothes, put dirty clothes in the right basket and more are all actions demonstrating orderliness.

It is not only the rules and instructions, the feedback is an equally important area where you need to be as clear as possible. Wadström and Ekvall (2013) makes a great point of being as specific as possible when it comes to handing out constructive criticism to their players. Empty phrases like "good job" says, in all honesty, nothing about what the player actually has done, while sentences like "I am very happy with the way you run home when we lose the ball in the offensive half of the pitch" is more clear with what the player has done. The same of course applies to sports slang as "you played like a warrior today". These words do not describe the behavior of the player, but notes that a player just "is" something.

It is easy to believe that clearness creates limitations, but in fact I think it inspires security and peace of all who will be part of a concrete action with clear guiding principles. Everyone knows their role, responsibilities, rights and obligations, but also what the purpose of the association is and what the common goal is that everyone strives for, and how it should be done. With this way everyone knows what to do.

Commitment

The iconic Liverpool coach Bill Shankly (2013) once said that the greatest force in the world is enthusiasm, it is the one that creates great things and are necessary for achieving success. It may sound obvious, but even the most indisputable things need to be written. It is taken for granted from time to time that all people are engaged in their professions, but it is not always as clear as it sometimes should be. Especially futsal coaches are often referred to in phrases like "passionate about their sport," yet it is not uncommon to see coaches standing by the side of a chilly pitch in November with arms crossed. Do not get me wrong now, it does not necessarily mean that the coach in question does not care, but I have seen this so many times now that in some cases it is hardly a coincidence to see a coach who is acting more like a materials manager.

I am not much for coaches who almost theatrically always flap their arms from the sideline, it is often just a game for the gallery which eventually becomes far too easy to read. But there are many ways to show commitment, more than to bounce up and down like a tennis ball on the sideline.

To keep the performance up when the form slumps come and when the sporting successes is not present, the leaders, coaches or parents mean much just by the way they pay attention to the athlete. The attention and interest from others is often a powerful positive reinforcement (Wadström & Ekvall, 2013, p. 51).

The above quote clearly demonstrates why I think commitment is so important. Enthusiasm does not always involve shouting, but it is about giving attention and interest for the individual in the current situation. A simple pat on the shoulder, while another player needs to hear it loud and clear what the players has done well.

It is a difficult balancing act, of course, but I as a leader have to adapt my way of being for the individual to be able to reach him. I, as a coach, need to show a genuine interest in what my mentees do and how they do it. According to me, it is essential that I in every way imaginable show, with all the tools I have in my arsenal, such as body language, voice, facial expressions and so on, that I care about my players' performance. Enthusiasm is contagious, and I am convinced that if I show how much I love what I am doing, the more urgent will my players be able to feel that the training sessions are this week's highlights.

Maybe it's unfair, but I as a coach must always give of my energy, every workout, every game, every week. That means sometimes a tough chore for me as a leader, it is difficult enough to be involved when it's minus 15 degrees Celsius outside on a training session, but then you need the acting skills, both to fool myself and remind me why I think this is fun, but partly also to motivate my players.

Wadström and Ekvall (2013) wrote about the expression "*move your ass and your mind will follow*" and it fits perfectly into the above situation. It may be theater, but is nonetheless effective in getting both myself and other to care.

Because if not I care about what happens on the pitch, then why should my players do it?

Dialogue

One of my big idols, Brian Clough (2004), expressed in a classic interview that, when a player did not agree on the coach's way of playing, they used to talk about it for twenty minutes, and finally jointly decide that the coach was right from the beginning. Although it is obviously a humorous view of how a dialogue can proceed between players and coaches, it is hardly a view of the interaction that I advocate.

It is important to point out that I am the coach. This means that it is I who ultimately takes decisions on everything from tactics, training schedules, troop composition and so on. The reason that it is I who makes the final choices are because I take responsibility for the outcome. It is rare with players that take on the responsibility of a loss, the shadow often falls on the coach and it is also he who in most cases will be blamed in the media, even if that person really only is a part of much larger puzzle. Anyone who takes responsibility is also the person who should take decisions and vice versa.

For precisely these reasons, it is important that the coach has the final word, but it does not mean that the dialogue should be absent. On the contrary, I believe that a good interaction between the leader and the group is essential to create understanding, agreements and good cohesion. For not many years ago it was more common than not that it was the coach who sat on all the answers and therefore the communication between players and leaders was a relatively one-sided story. However, this has changed in recent years.

The player finds new ways to solve the problem when the coach asks questions, set the parameters of the situation, arrange a game scenario and provides support to get the player to find suitable and effective behaviors and reinforce constructive suggestions (Wadström & Ekvall 2013, p. 69).

The quote above tells about the method of the so-called guided discovery, a procedure that is now strongly advocated by, among others, the Swedish Football Association. The aim of the procedure is to create participation in the group so that they feel they are sitting on them answers themselves, which in itself provides reinforcement for the desired behavior. A negative person could argue that this method is actually manipulative when the coach sets up a scenario to promote a desired behavior rather than to scrap the framework altogether, but it is important that the player can come up with the right answer on a difficult question. Anyone who has managed to install a TV without a manual should know how rewarding it is to figure out the solution without a guide, so why would not the same apply in futsal?

In addition, this approach opens up new solutions that the coach might not have thought of. Even if I decide the futsal philosophy, the design is no longer mine but ours when I throw out my thoughts to the group. In that moment, it is we who create a common platform to work from and hopefully further develop the idea I had.

In the dialogue, I think that there are two additional categories that are important - respect and compassion. When I write respect, I of course mean the behaviors we display towards each other, but also the actions we are doing against our opponents, referees, audience, media, sponsors and others. That we should greet each other is the most obvious good behavior, but are we allowed to call each other for anything we like in what is often referred to as "the heat of battle"? Many appear to argue that, but I do not agree with it.

For me, futsal is the most beautiful sport and therefore we need to treat it with dignity. Calling our opponents more or less dubious foul words, spitting at the referee or refuse to take in hand after a game is not to a good example. We often forget that we are role models for a new generation of players and therefore we need to think about how we act on and off the court. Children do not do as we say, but as we do.

I often get comments on this, a player must "be allowed to show feelings". Obviously, they must do so, futsal is a great deal of emotions, but there are many different ways to show it. Kicking a water bottle is not the same as to "show passion," but "to lose temper". It is just a reaction to a failure, not positive, in other words. By contrast, to turn the negative energy to improve themselves and strengthen their teammates is a worthy way to show respect and feelings. It is also much more constructive.

Compassion for me is to understand that there are people we work with. People are our greatest resource and the ones who conduct all performances. There are things that are easy to forget when it comes to futsal. These people naturally have feelings, they think and do things, sometimes they will also suffer. Therefore, it is important that I as a leader make them grow, both as man and professionals, but also that I am there for them if they need me. It does not mean that I always need to go easy with them, but it means my door is always open if they want to talk. I advocate a twoway communication, at least if the forum and time is the right one. Sometimes players come up to me and wants to discuss why they were not in the starting eleven last weekend. Then we have a conversation in which I explain my decision, sometimes they have understood me, sometimes not, but I think it is important to dare to take the discussions. This means that we meet and get a greater mutual respect towards each other.

Summary

At the beginning of this work to develop my leadership philosophy, I wrote about Super Ted, the hero in the form of a supernatural teddy bear who saved the world. It is thanks to him, I decided to shorten my leadership philosophy to TED (clearness, commitment and dialogue).

CLEARNESS - The need to be concrete and precise, and to be thorough with everything one undertakes and to set a precise set of expectations on what one expects of his players.

COMMITMENT – Use as many methods as possible to show that the leader cares about his players.

DIALOGUE - Take decisions, but be always open to dialogue with the players. Show respect towards opponents, teammates, supporters, leaders, referees and others and set a good example, as well as being compassionate. Always keep the door open.

Super Ted embodies in many ways my leadership philosophy. He was clear in his rejection against the evil, despite several overtures. He saved the world and he always tried to have a dialogue with his criminals in the first place, rather than involve violence.

It may sound silly, but sometimes a teddy bear is everything we need to lead people in the desired direction.

References

Wadström, O. & Ekvall, D. (2013). *Idrottsglädje Prestation Utveckling. Kognitiv beteendeterapi för tränare, idrottare och föräldrar*. Mjölby Tryckeri. ISBN 978-91-981441-1-6. P. 12-13, 32, 33, 51, 69, 83.

Banta, M., Connell, D., Cottrell, W., Grant, J., Hibler, W., Huemer, D., Kelsey, D., Oreb, T., Peet, B., Penner, E., Rinaldi, J., Sears, T., & Walbridge, J. (1951). *Alice in Wonderland*. Walt Disney Productions.

Liverpool Echo. (2013). Liverpool FC legend Bill Shankly - his most famous quotations. Liverpool Echo.

<http://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/sport/football/football-news/liverpool-fc-legend-bill-shankly-3435313>

BBC Sport. (2004). Clough in his own words. BBC Sport.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/football/3674210.stm>