

Lachlan Tighe: Talking Tactically website bowls coaching column

(June 2010 column)

Leadership & communications in bowls teams

How do you improve leadership, and communication, in a four rink bowls team? That question was posed to those of us from a handful of clubs around a table recently. The responses came fast and furious and yet I felt no one answered the above question.

Why do we want to improve leadership, and communication, in the team? Did you have that thinking swirling around your head at all, I did.

Maybe because the club wants to win next season's premiership. OK, and has the club (committee) asked the members of the team if that is what they want, individually and collectively. Now that is done, so let's find out while they are gathered together what is it they think are the factors to getting that success on grand final day. You should then have a swag of comments from the team, 16 in fact (you did get 16, why not?) that are sound and sensible views for our future success; and might include

- training together regularly
- improving all player skills
- choosing right players in right positions
- agreed behaviour – good and bad
- game plans for rinks
- performance standards in competition

Now we have a global view from the members and our own club sub sets of views to use to achieve success.

Improving Team leadership- assume all of the above are agreed to by members it may be time to appoint team members as leaders who have the responsibility to steer the team in that agreed direction. A lead is a playing position, a leader is a person of quality, a lead may also be a leader of the team.

Ah ha...an omission; great to have the responsibility, but give the leadership authority too. And it needs to be two way. The club says yes you the team choose the appointed leadership but you the team have to know these blokes have the authority to praise/ punish the team members who stray or adversely impact on performance of the team.

We may improve leadership by having everyone agree what their role is, what their performance is expected to be, what their behaviour needs to be in those tight games we will encounter. And it has to be an agreement, it has to be something they and we can see so there is no misunderstanding.

I feel we can develop leadership by encouraging prospective leaders that they need to give and earn respect. And start practising by demonstrating respect to team members. You might even go so far as to have a 'buddy' system where our known leaders take a prospective leader under their wing to support them in their development.

Leadership in bowls is bestowed on the skip automatically. And rightly so. They have the most tasks to perform in the rink; they have the most influence on the choice of decisions of the team; they have the most influence on the behaviour of the rink team; they have the most interaction with the other team members; the skip is the most visible player in a team; the skip takes the greatest level of observation analysis in the rink. All of that adds up to the greatest level of responsibility and ipso facto the greatest level of leadership and/ or opportunity to demonstrate leadership.

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In sport it is usually the athlete possessing leadership capacity that gets a prime role in a team. In bowls the prime role of skip is given because of the superior bowls skill. Bowls seems to interpret leadership as bowls skill.

Assume you agree that a skip needs leadership skill more than bowls skill, then a club (read selectors and club coach) should help develop leadership skill in skips and other players. It could be done by having good players with limited leadership skill moved to a third position in a rink team where they are more in the spotlight for leadership, tactical directions and team morale.

Successful teams depend on their leaders and the more leaders in the team the better our prospect for success. Any great team has great players of skill, great position players, and great leaders.

Leaders are often not chosen, like cream they rise to the top. They are leaders because of who they are, but they have to accept that mantle of leadership. They could be categorised as positive, passive or negative. The first category is the one your bowls team requires.

The club has to determine how to pick the leaders in the team

- four skips of best ability
- rotate skips and thirds as skips over the season to develop leadership
- assign more roles to team members as leadership roles e.g.run training one night

Waiting to see which players develop leadership qualities may be like watching paint dry. Better to give people a responsibility and observe their leadership quality in operation. Invariably leaders will be people others look up to, whether they have a title or not. The preferred way to develop leaders of the team is give them power, responsibility and authority. Who does that- formally, the committee, selectors and club coach. Informally the other players in the team.

One of us at that table said that people and team members crave leadership. Teams do and often it is because these others follow not wanting to lead the team members. Watch the passive members ensure they don't turn into snipers undermining the effort of leaders. Not everyone gets the starring role in a movie but the credits always recognise all the different contributions to the success of the movie.

Leadership in Clubs

Teams and clubs need leadership on the green in the form of coaches, skips and team captains and the senior skilled players who want to accept the responsibility. Leadership is seen in these people (coaches, managers, senior team members) who have some, or many, or perhaps, all of these attributes:

- Provide direction and vision for the team and its members
- develop and foster the culture we want for the team
- chart the course for us as a team
- Seek to develop an environment / atmosphere where every individual has the maximum opportunity to aspire to and achieve success
- Do not get over preoccupied on memorizing techniques or game plans more about paying attention to people- really believing in them, really caring about them, really involving them
- Show interest in everyone's achievements
- Demonstrates pride in the accomplishment of the group
- Encouraged feedback, both good and bad

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- Work on developing their people skills, interpersonal skills, communication skills
 - Make an impact or difference by being in the team
 - Understand that others who exert leadership can also make a difference (to a team), therefore share the leadership
 - Know that excellence in teams is a product of superior leadership by individuals who have acquired specific skills to commit people to pursue the goals
 - Understand that excellence happens due to preparedness to lead from the front, and, work hard when in the leadership role
 - Persuade people to meet commitment and know edicts and coercion do not provide commitment (might realize a level of involvement but that falls below Commitment)
 - Rephrase that to encourage not enforce the individuals in the team to commit, or be removed
 - Reinforce the goals of the team frequently by application to the various environments mentioned above and never rely on a simple singular edict or statement to be the answer
 - Selecting, motivating, rewarding, retaining and unifying members of your team
 - embrace the resources within the club to pursue that joint club and team vision.
- Can you identify such leaders/ quality people as bowlers skips, committee or coaches at your club?

All of this leads to **improved communication** as our second topic for discussion around the table. We have started the communication ball rolling above.

One easy way of improving communication is by referring to team members/ mates by their name. Personalise your communication. Use of the word 'mate' seems an out for a lazy way of dealing with other people. We can train ourselves to do that by use of the player names at [training](#).

For the day of competition there is an innate need to comply with an agreed role and aspects of communication. Recently I was surprised to hear some bowls officials say everyone should have a say in the rink/ skip choices in the game. If the team agreed to that notion beforehand well and good. The team should agree to bestowing leadership on the skip having had meetings and training beforehand on planning our game approach and each persons role and expected contribution..

We can improve communication, verbal and non verbal, by stating our realistic expectations to all with one another as team members. Why do we expect we in a team can 'walk on water' as bowlers when in truth we/ they more often than not need their water floaties as safety to waddle through a game.

Look get us all in the team to train together to talk up our collective efforts. Despatch to the sidelines all negative stuff. Even if we just encourage each other to say nothing when we stuff up. Improving communication is a simple approach of genuinely enjoying the company of other team members.

I guess that all adds up to a form of team building through communication. And the forums then are training sessions, pre game meetings, team meetings on the day, and, lastly the post game debrief on our performance. Trust and honesty are the ingredients essential to assist the development of the communication

I use the word members not mates because your bowls mates may be in different teams and rinks. Enjoy the company of the members who make the commitment to be alongside you. They have a commitment and skill equivalent to yours. Unfortunately your bowls mates may not have either of those two ingredients.

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Your fellow team members are chosen by selectors. Trust in the selectors and the team members. You the individual bowler can show your part in the leadership factor by embracing fully the selectors choice of all other 15 bowls members. You do that and you kick start a better level of communication with peer bowlers.

Being together more regularly at training and games will assist better communication. Added to success creates chance for a higher level of communication.

Skipping is about team management of people who may not automatically choose to play with the nominated skipper. Bowlers universally acknowledged as good skippers/ leaders probably do these things

- Communicate to team members so that the players want to do well for the skip
- Use words and tones that assist that cause
- Be honest and yet supportive, encouraging
- Uses sensible proportion of support mingled with honesty and consideration so as not to appear to be 'overboard' with the hype
- Avoids negative word usage and body language and certainly does not include a statement of obvious error in pace or grass by a bowler
- Never appears derogatory in word or action
- Style of direction and management is inclusive and clear, and never confrontational- barking and haranguing are non existent
- Involve the players and especially the third who has more shot considerations and changes to prepare for at the other end- attitude of player on the mat sought when shot preference numerous and perhaps confusing when viewed from the other end

Skippers who call instructions which are easily understood and shared with teammates have a higher probability of desired outcome, subject to proper execution by the bowler(s).

Skips tend to forget the messages sent off by them at the conclusion of the deliveries are as important as their effort in advising bowlers what is wanted of them with deliveries.

Improve communication in all the club teams by learning, and applying, the skills from our model leader skips.

Lachlan Tighe, 2010