

AVOID THE TOP 10 MISTAKES TEAM CAPTAINS MAKE

By Craig Hillier

I received an e-mail recently from a potential captain who posed an intriguing question. “What are the top mistakes captains make?” After pondering this excellent question, I compiled a list. While the list could certainly be longer, future captains will improve the odds of a great season by avoiding these 10 mistakes.

#1: Thinking the “job” is over after being elected or selected

An athletic director recently shared a story about how his cross country captains, who were elected after the season, basically put their feet up. They thought that because they had the title, the real work was done. Top-notch captains understand the work is just beginning. Being elected or selected as a team leader is an honor and it’s vital to work as hard as possible for the team. In reality, after being selected, the work has just begun.

#2: Trying to please everyone

Smart leaders operate on the 10-80-10 principle. Ten percent of the team will be very cooperative and easy to work with on a daily basis. They will follow a leader and create few problems. The other 10% of the team will be somewhat difficult. This group causes numerous problems because they don’t take direction well and refuse to be good team players. The middle 80% of the team hasn’t decided who to follow. The direction of this large group can make or break a season. Great captains spend a lot of time working with the 80%. The “difficult” 10% must be managed differently.

#3 Not confronting difficult issues with the team

Remember that 10%? If a teammate is affecting the team with a poor attitude or bad choices, a team captain must address them head-on: otherwise, he or she, risks point the team toward trouble. If team leaders simply sweep poor behavior under the rug, eventually that rug will have so much dirt under it, the team won’t function properly. As difficult as it is to confront a teammate, it’s important to address the behavior or attitude issues before they get out of hand.

#4: Not confronting a difficult issue with a coach

Team captains and coaches have a unique relationship. On one hand, a team captain is an extension of the coaching staff. On the other hand, a captain is an athlete on the squad. The bottom line is that the coach has the final say in practice and in competition. If there's a tough situation that needs to be discussed however, an effective team leader must take the risk of approaching the coach with it. Sometimes, coaches may not see how their actions affect the team. Of course, discussing the issue could backfire for any number of reasons. So be prepared. The best team captains will formulate their conversation, keep their composure, and take confident steps to talk it out. If the conversation goes badly, the team leader will know he or she was willing to be a leader by attempting to resolve the issue. If the conversation goes well, the team leader will earn even more respect from his or her teammates and coaching staff.

#5: Not connecting with parents of teammates or players

Blake was the senior basketball captain when my son was a freshman. I remember one day when I was working out at the local gym. He approached me and said, "Hi, Mr. Hillier, my name is Blake. I've been watching your son play hoops and I think he's going to be a great player." Impressed with his attitude, I asked, "How do you know my son?" Blake confidently explained, "I'm the team captain and he has been showing up for captain's practice this summer." What surprised me was the fact that Blake knew who I was. It is easy to think team captains just connect with the players, but this would be a mistake. By connecting and communicating with parents, team captains show parents that their kids are in good hands. Even if captains don't know all the parent's names, it's impressive when a team leader takes the initiative to talk with a parent.

#6: "Dissing" players or coaches behind their backs

It's easy to pick on players who are not very talented. Sometimes it may create a laugh by poking fun at someone who is struggling. It's also easy to complain about a coach when he or she is not there. The problem with "dissing" a player or coach is that the damage is hard to measure, but it can run very deep. It's not uncommon for a younger athlete to struggle as a sophomore and be a superstar as a senior. Unfortunately, some kids who get picked on decide not to participate the following year. If team captains are "dissing" coaches behind their backs, it opens the floodgates for the rest of the team to think it's okay. This pattern could eventually destroy the team. Even if team captains are not crazy about a teammate or the coach, it's usually wise to watch your words.

#7: Not planning ahead

Top-notch leaders are forward thinkers. While this may be a struggle for some personality types, it's important to anticipate the future. For example, if team leaders attempt to order team t-shirts one day and expect them to be ready the next, there's a problem. Waiting until the last minute to get something done will likely lead to frustration for fellow teammates and for the coaching staff. When team captains plan ahead and allow "cushion" time for the intended results, however, anxiety is lowered and the team can focus on becoming their best.

#8: Believing the only place leadership is shown revolves around a given sport

Some students just want to be seen as leaders in their sport and want to take off their leadership "cap" after a competition or practice. Let's face it, captains are always representing their team and are under the watchful eye of others. Captains who disrupt in the classroom or display unsportsmanlike conduct in the stands do not shine a positive light on themselves, their high school or their respected team. High schools need leaders in the classroom, in the stands and in the community. They must be a positive example in all arenas. The leadership "cap" can't be placed on a hook after the game or practice; it's worn all the time.

#9: Giving 80% effort and expecting 100% results

The best captains consistently work harder than everyone else. Tim Tebow said, "Hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work hard." Even if the team captain is considered the best athlete on the field, they never operate at 80%. If a team captain doesn't give their "all" in practice or in competition, it gives everyone else permission to do the same. Effective captains give 100% effort -100% of the time. They give no less, even if they don't "feel" like it.

#10: Expecting to do a good job without leadership training

For too many years, athletes have been elected or selected and are then given little or no training or direction on how to be an effective captain. With all the resources available today, there is no excuse for being an uneducated team captain. Dozens of learning avenues are available for team captains including books, websites, and live workshops. While it may take time and effort to research the options, tapping into the power of experts will increase the odds of an excellent season. Great leaders are willing to put the time in outside of their sport to sharpen their skills and learn tips and strategies from those who have been there before them.

Being elected or selected as a team captain is an honor and a privilege. The role should not be taken lightly. When leaders avoid the top 10 mistakes captains make, they will look back at the season years from now with great pride. They will know they accepted the challenge of the role, put the team's needs ahead of their own, and created a season of significance!