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“Metaphors are useful linguistic structures that have helped theorists and practitioners generate ideas, concepts, models, and theories for describing, examining, and understanding phenomena in education” (Bredeson 1985, 29). Although metaphors come in many themes (war/military, machine, art, music, religious/spiritual), sports metaphors lend themselves to educational leadership because they emphasize “team spirit” and “team play” and players have the latitude to make “autonomous decision(s) so as to further the team’s overall goal” (Oberlechner and Mayer-Schonberger, 2006, 167). In a collaborative vein, sports metaphors stream “…information flows [that] are much less hierarchical: facts, suggestions, and demands are regularly mixed” (167).

"Because many people participate or have participated in athletics, sports metaphors are often likely to generate listener interest. So sports metaphors are of educational value because they can simplify difficult concepts, shorten communication cycles, and generate listener interest in many subject areas” (Offstein and Neck 2003).

Sports Metaphor Framework

In schools, the theme of sports can be used throughout the building to motivate staff and students. The students are players, staff members are coaches, and the administration are head coaches. All are necessary members of the team, and all must work together to achieve team goals. This theme kicks off the school year by having a training camp for staff (professional development) to launch the beginning of the school year. Sports-themed snacks including peanuts, popcorn, and crackerjacks and giveaways such as pompoms in school colors, pennants, and sports-themed school supplies generate interest.

“SPORT” is an acronym that is being used in a number of schools employing the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) model. Prior to PBIS, the acronym SPORT was used and has since been adapted by some schools to represent Safety, Property, Order, Respect, and Task. Students and staff work together to determine how these apply to various areas of the school (classroom, hall, bathroom, cafeteria, and playground) and these rules and expectations are posted in these areas as a reminder for all to see. Students are prompted to “be a good sport” by following these rules. Students having difficulty with the rules receive penalties or are “benched” for a brief amount of time. Teachers (coaches) and students (players) can call a time out to huddle and discuss problems or issues and rework the game plan. These team meetings occur frequently to build cooperation among students.

Inspirational quotes related to sports are visible throughout the school and these quotes are also part of
The school is decorated in a sports theme: hallways are assigned a particular sport—Soccer Street, Hockey Hall, Basketball Boulevard, and Tennis Trail. Each teacher’s classroom spends the first week of school choosing a sport to represent the class. Classes design a team jersey, choose a mascot, and make up a class cheer. Instead of weekly star students, classes have MVPs. Grades represent scores; class work represents practice; homework represents conditioning; and tests are on game day. Students work to better their personal bests on game days. Tests such as Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) are tournaments or playoffs and the Palmetto Achievement Challenge Tests (PACT) is the Super Bowl or World Series.

Special area classes and members of the community are involved in implementing this theme. In physical education class, various sports are taught as units. At the end of the year, a school wide Olympics event is held. The PTA and others supporters of the school are the fans. The library features many sports-themed books and has a competition for reading the most books. Local athletes and coaches are invited to speak to students.

The one caution is that “…a sports metaphor increases message-relevant elaboration and sensitivity to argument (sic) strength among individuals who enjoy sports….Conversely, the sports metaphor reduces message-relevant elaboration and sensitivity to argument (sic) strength among individuals who dislike sports” (Ottati, Rhoads, and Graesser 1999). Hence, the presentation of a variety of sports options may garner participation among individuals as those who do not like a particular sport may be so inclined to engage in a metaphor for a different sport.

So, in keeping with the advantage of offering an array of sports themes, four sports metaphors for motivational leadership are presented below.

Golf Metaphor

Female golfer Annika Sorenstam indicates she spent years learning tactics and strategies to continually improve her game (2004). She is willing to take risks and brave consequences in order to become a champion. Below are some of Annika’s favorite lessons, which can be as effective for advice in educational leadership as they are to her on the golf course.

“Face Your Fears—Golf involves psychological fears—fears of hitting poor shots, looking foolish, or losing your ball in a water hazard. It is best to accept that fear and tackle it head-on. In practice, focus on the shots and situations that make you nervous or afraid until your fear is replaced with confidence.

Learn From Everything—Try to see every situation, good or bad, as a learning experience. When you learn from every experience, your confidence grows.

Take One Shot at a Time—This is one of the most important concepts of all. For each shot, you must let go of positive and negative emotions and focus on the task at hand, making the best swing that you possibly can. You are going to feel angry after bad shots and elated after exceptional ones; accept
those feelings and quickly move on. A consistent pre-shot routine can help you stay in the moment.

Focus on What You Can Control—Golf is a game of skill and luck. No matter how well you play, someone else might play better. No matter how solid you swing, your ball may bounce into a terrible lie. In golf, as in life, there is no sense in fuming over things you cannot control. Use your energy thinking and working on what you can change.

There Are No Shortcuts—Golf can seem frustrating at times and improvement comes only with time and hard work. Once you accept that there are no quick fixes, you'll get more out of the game. You'll get the satisfaction that comes from working hard at something rewarding” (21).

Metaphors create a common language that is inherent in building a positive school culture. The following language of golf relates to motivational leadership in schools:

Players/ Educators:

- Professional pro—expert on tour/ master teachers, educational consultants or National Board Teacher Certified (NBCT) educators
- Club pro—one-site consultant/ teacher coach
- Amateurs—players striving to make par/ pre-service teachers in the field
- Beginners—players just learning/ induction teachers/student interns
- Caddies—carry golf bags, maintain equipment, repair ball marks, rake sand in bunkers/ support staff (teacher assistants, and custodial staff)

Fundamentals of Golf/ Back to Basics in Education:

- Grip—holding or handling the club/ managing people and programs with finesse
- Alignment—aiming at the target/ setting the mission and vision statement
- Set up—positioning body to make the golf shot/ developing a strategic plan
- Tempo—rhythm of golf swing/ balancing the curriculum and pacing instruction

Scores/ Achievement:

- Hole in One—perfect score on a hole during a golf game/ making a 100% on a test or assessment (scoring “advanced” on PACT or 1600 on SAT)
- Eagle/Birdie—shots (2 or 1) under par/ scoring “advanced” on PACT
- Par—meeting the target score/ passing a test or scoring “proficient” on PACT
- Bogie—scoring 1 over par (less than target score)/ not doing well on a test or scoring "basic" or “below basic” on PACT

Penalties/ Teaching:

- Whiff—ineffective shot due to completely missing the ball/ ineffective teacher that never
reaches the students

- Hook/Slice—shot that skews left or right of the fairway/ teacher who “bird walks” or veers away from the curriculum while teaching
- Sand Trap/Rough/Water Hazard—obstacles that may deter progress in a golfer’s game/ lack of prior knowledge, health problems, divorce, death or other events that cause emotional or psychological stress, and/or deficiencies that prevent a student from making expected progress

And, for the Club House (19th hole) where golfers gather to rehash the game, the education counterpart is the faculty lounge where teachers gather to eat, discuss teaching and learning strategies, and vent (lament the bad shots).

From the practice tee to the club house, golfers and leaders need to reflect on their round of play. Donald E. McHugh suggests a “basic leadership round” chart as a checklist (McHugh 2004, 226) that invites self evaluation in “18” areas including “showing passion and enthusiasm for what we do and [sharing] it with others,” “focusing on the situation, issue, or problem, not on the person,” and “communicating performance goals, expectations, and measurement.” Golf as a metaphor for motivational leadership (business or education) has its own “language, rules, customs, and etiquette” as do all sports metaphors (3).

Surfing Metaphor

When a school’s hallways are painted with waves, dolphins, and sand dollars and the school is located 10 minutes from the beach, surfing is a logical sports metaphor that can be used to motivate teachers, students, and staff. The common language, adapted from “Competition Tips” (n.d.), includes:

**Surf/ School Conditions**

- A beach break with multiple random peaks/ school on a normal academic day
- Pipeline(classic Hawaiian wave)/ PACT or MAP testing days
- Impact zone—part of the ocean on which to surf/ anywhere you can teach
- Wave/ classroom or anywhere teaching is taking place

**Surfing/ School Operations:**

- Paddling out/ beginning of the year, or beginning a new program
- Standing up/ when a new program is in place and people are becoming comfortable with it
- Hanging ten/e verything is running smoothly, and well.
- Goofy or goofy footed/ someone who likes to do things a little differently. Another way to look at a problem. “Let’s try this “goofy footed”
- New school/ name given to new tricks, new ideas
- Wipeout—really messing up/ doing something silly or unaware of, a bad lesson or low test scores
Surf buddy/a fellow teacher or mentor—never surf/teach alone

Shredding/high quality lessons with “snappy powerful moves” (What we should be doing all day!)

Catching waves/teaching

Wet suits and sun screen—protection against chilly conditions/dealing with difficult students, and parents. Keep calm, tell the facts, and don’t be defensive.

Competition tips for surfers/principals and teacher:

· “The fundamental importance of the criteria is that each judge understands what he is looking for from the surfers, and each surfer knows the points on which he is going to be judged (para. 1)”/teachers, students, and administrators know what is expected.

· “A surfer must execute the most radical controlled maneuvers in the critical section of a wave with speed and power throughout… (para. 2)”/plan good lessons, stay on task, and know your students.

· “Competitors earn higher scores by performing the higher quality maneuvers… Judges look at what the competitors are doing right—not their mistakes (para. 6)”/administrators look for and reward what teachers are doing right and teachers look for and reward what students are doing right.

· Rewards are granted for good and excellent surfing/distribute certificates and positive notes when you see excellence and use the surf theme like “Iron Man/Woman Surfer”—one who has surfed the most waves/heats successfully.

· “Poor surfing is not rewarded. Competitors may surf poorly on quality waves for a long distance; however the fact remains, it’s still poor surfing no matter how long the ride. Judges are looking for quality not quantity (para. 7)”/if the curriculum/instruction doesn’t work, don’t keep doing it.

The surfing metaphor works well for a year-long theme. Excerpts from “Endless Summer,” a classic surfing movie from the 60’s, would be an apt “kickoff” to this metaphor for motivation to achieve school goals.

100-Yard Dash Metaphor

Metaphors can be used for a year-long theme or a one-time event. “The selection of metaphors is also influenced by the situation in which those metaphors are used: different situations may evoke different leadership metaphors in the same individual” (Oberlechner and Mayer-Schonberger 2006, 166). In preparation for the High School Assessment Program (HSAP) exam, the “Let’s Win the 100-Yard Dash” theme sets the tone. Teachers, students, and staff are motivated by the common 100-yard dash/testing language of the metaphor:

· Warm-up stretches/intense review at the beginning of the school year.

· Practice laps/all teachers, regardless of subject area, engage the students in lessons that will prepare them for the HSAP. These activities include drill and practice exercises at the beginning of math and English class each day, a co-curricular focus on essay writing using a school-wide model in English and social studies, and an integration of algebra and basic math concepts into
the science and social studies curricula.

- “Prep” for game day/ teachers instruct students on strategies for doing well on the exam and overcoming test taking anxieties. These strategies include the following: getting plenty of rest the night before exam; eating a moderate breakfast; reviewing the entire test and reading all of the instructions carefully; pacing oneself during the test; and, reading all of the multiple choice options first and then eliminating the responses that are obviously wrong. Since there is a school-wide focus for the exam, students are rewarded for perfect attendance during the exam week. Some of these rewards include a special dress down day (for schools that normally require student uniforms), free admission to one of the home game sporting events, or a pass to get a free slice of pizza during lunch.

- Race day/ students take exams. The principal makes reference to the exam during the morning announcement along with inspirational readings to the students.

- Victory lap/ celebrations after exam completion. Celebrations include a school-wide assembly or field day with a culminating 100-yard dash that includes students, faculty, and staff members.

Baseball Metaphor

Using a baseball metaphor to “bring home” the importance of rigor and relevance is a natural choice for a school administrator. The first faculty meeting of the school year is reserved to encourage staff members to “bat ideas around.”

The common baseball/ school language includes:

- Season/ 180-day school year
- Stats/ State Report Card
- Spring training/ PACT preparation
- Most Valuable Player (MVP)/ Teacher of the Year
- Team Managers/ principal and vice-principal
- Team coach/ teacher coach
- Farm team/ induction (beginning/new) teachers
- Senior players/ continuing contract teachers
- Hall of Fame inductees/ attainment of SMART goals—strategic and specific, measurable, attainable, results-based, and time-bound (O’Neill et al, 2006, 13-17)

The Leadership Team develops ideas to include celebrations such as a “7th Inning Stretch” (during the 7th month of school) to celebrate the academic accomplishments of teachers and students up to that point in the school year. A field day, culminating with a baseball game (of course) marks this point in the school year. Academic baseball games between homerooms are played during the school year.
Baseball caps or pennants are awarded to the winners of tournaments (division championships). All of this is done in preparation for the World Series (state assessment) which is played at the end of the school year. For inspiration (rally!), portions of the movie “For the Love of the Game” are highlighted during crucial times of the year—semester openings, testing sessions and celebrations.

Conclusion

No matter the sport (golf, surfing, 100-yard dash, baseball, or other), “leadership metaphors create leadership reality by defining such important aspects as the leader’s role and the context in which leadership takes place” (Oberlechner and Mayer-Schonberger 2006, 161). Sports metaphors are particularly suited to educational leadership and are effective as a motivation tool for a school year-long theme or a single event such as a designated state testing period enabling staff and students to focus on one task. Sports, in spirit and practice, require discipline, courtesy, and “fair play.” Sports metaphors have the added bonus of emphasizing both the importance of “team play” and individual accountability, conditioning/training, and decision-making within the context of the team—all at the helm of a motivational leader.

References


