



COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP IN COLLEGE ATHLETICS: “IT’S A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE”

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Division I athletic departments have contended with loss of revenue following the COVID-19 pandemic, record turnover in employees (Huml et al., 2022), and rising costs to support the needs of student-athletes. Research has suggested that compassionate leadership is critically important during moments of crisis (Powley & Piderit, 2008) as well as in everyday scenarios (Dutton et al., 2014; Shuck et al., 2019). Compassionate leaders foster more loyalty and engagement (Shuck et al., 2019), as well as a sense of purpose, professional growth, and overall better mental and physical well-being (Tramuto, 2022). As a result, compassionate leaders foster healthier work environments, stronger teams, and deliver results even in times of turmoil (Tramuto, 2022). This qualitative study explored the leadership of compassionate athletic directors in NCAA Division I. Specifically, we explored compassionate leadership as a lived experience and how such leadership guides actions and builds relationships.

To date, nine NCAA Division I athletic directors (8 men, 1 woman) representing FBS and FCS schools and conferences have been interviewed for this study. These individuals were identified as compassionate leaders by peer athletic administrators in the industry. The findings from these interviews follows.

Compassionate Characteristics

All athletic directors in this study demonstrated compassionate behaviors (Shuck et al., 2019) of empathy, integrity, accountability, presence, authenticity, and dignity. However, leaders in this study also demonstrated an additional behavior of demonstrating vulnerability.

On vulnerability...

“Sometimes you have to go through a very uncomfortable situation like that to really open your eyes to. To what you're not and where you need to grow and that was something that that I'll forever remember. And it's allowed me to really share in a very vulnerable way with the young leaders that I have in my own team now that I'm not perfect, this stuff is hard and you know, and there's a lot to learn.” Mike

“The self awareness and self reflection of you know, how did you handle situation? You know, should I have done something a little bit differently? Rarely if ever do I think, I nailed that one...No, I could have handled that a little bit better... I'm not great at it all the time.”

Steve

Athletic directors in this study perceived showing vulnerability as an opportunity to build connections with staff, develop open lines of communication for feedback and input, and humanize the role of the athletic director.

Compassion in Practice



While athletic directors demonstrated compassionate behaviors, this study sought to understand what compassionate behaviors looked like in everyday practice. Compassionate behaviors manifested themselves in (a) building connection through communication, (b) investing in people, (c) setting clear expectations, and (d) demonstrating trust.

On connection through communication...

“It’s love, right. It’s not, the gushy “hey I love you” those type of things. It’s a true agape type of love of “hey let’s be connected,” right, let’s be involved. And let’s be willing to have open, honest, you know, conversations of what’s going on.” Clark

“It’s important to have those small touch points with your people at all times, right? Just checking in and tell them when they’re doing good stuff...I think I don’t think I can ever do a good enough job of doing this, but painting the picture of how all this works.” Lucas

On investing in people...

“When I do hire a senior leadership level, it’s important to me that they know that a part of their job is mentoring.” Ann

“What do you wanna do?...Where do you wanna end up five years from now? And you know, let’s see if we can put you on a path to get that done.” Steve

“I’m willing to invest in you, and I’m willing to have conversations and I’m willing to challenge you in and have you think differently because I know you can be different, right?” Clark

On setting clear expectations...

“One of the biggest components of compassionate leadership is setting expectations... we’re gonna do the best we can but if that’s not good enough...we’ve set the expectation of what it’s going to be like here and what we want it to be like here and if that’s not if that doesn’t work for you I’m not gonna listen to the ***** like you gotta you gotta go.” Steve

“We had very defined goals and unit goals and held each of these areas accountable to that. And they had to present on them. And we had check-ins and, you know, and so it wasn’t waiting till the end of the year evaluation and say, oh, by the way, last fall, you know, you weren’t doing what you were supposed to be doing. You that’s happening in real time and the right hand always knew what the left hand. It didn’t mean they had to enjoy it.” Mike

On demonstrating trust...

“I feel much more comfortable and in making these decisions and being in this leadership role in being able to kind of empower my staff and let them move forward without me having to be a micromanager over them.” Joe

“But ultimately you should be able to have input in conversation into what you think’s important to your unit because that’s why we hire you, right.” Clark



For the athletic directors, these demonstrated actions also exemplified caring for their employees.

Compassion as a Catalyst

Finally, athletic directors described compassion as a key component to (a) relationships, (b) learning leadership, and (c) building culture.

On relationships ...

“Your success is my success; and my success is your success. that we're gonna share the heck out of celebrate together.” Lucas

“I mean the little things like that, but again, it's all about the relationship in my opinion. People are gonna do more for you if they know you really care.” Gregg

On learning as a leader...

“Every person that I see in the leadership role I take from them something that I would like to kind of put in my, umm, I would say bag of tricks and especially if they if I work for them and there was something that made me feel really good.” Ann

“You're coming up and developing your leadership style, like, don't ever forget those moments that a leader made you feel like **** You don't want to feel like that. You know, to me there's other ways to get things accomplished than just, you know, trying to bury somebody.” Steve

On building culture ...

“I think we've created the culture in this room, senior staff to be able to have conversations and bring things up... You know, if you're really gonna build a culture like you have to, you know, you have to live it.” Steve

“And so sometimes you got to discipline your staff members and you got to hold them accountable. And we're actually going to an offsite tomorrow to talk about culture and to talk about accountability, because I think we've kind of lost our way a little bit and some of those.” Gregg

“Compassion is a point of differentiation. Actually, I think it's a competitive advantage.” Tom

Practical Implications|

Ninety-eight unique athletic directors were identified as compassionate leaders. However, this represents just 27% of NCAA Division I athletic department leaders. Still, there *are* leaders in intercollegiate athletics that exhibit compassionate leadership behaviors. The goal, then, is to increase the number of compassionate leaders in the industry to mitigate turnover, burnout, and other negative work experiences. More importantly, the behaviors demonstrated by athletic directors in this study can be learned by *any* athletic department employee. Learning and demonstrating compassionate leadership behaviors and practices might be *most* beneficial for athletic administrators that occupy middle management roles (e.g., assistant athletic directors, associate athletic directors), especially managers with multiple reporting lines. In a highly competitive industry, leaders can and should prioritize compassion.