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## Leadership Development in Athletic Training: A Qualitative Study

W. David Carr

*Missouri State University, wdavidcarr@missouristate.edu*

Tona Hetzler

*Missouri State University, tonahetzler@missouristate.edu*

Stephanie M. Singe

*University of Connecticut, stephanie.m.singe@uconn.edu*

William Pitney

*Northern Illinois University, wpitney@niu.edu*

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### Abstract

**Purpose** The purpose of this study was to explore how athletic trainers describe their leadership and how the profession can develop future leaders. **Methods:** Eight participants (four females, four males) completed a phone interview. Interview data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed utilizing a grounded theory approach. The trustworthiness of the data was established by using member checks and triangulation. **Results:** Characteristics of Leadership theme was defined as 1) Interpersonal Skills, 2) Vision, 3) Pride in Others' Success, 4) Ethical Decision Making, and 5) Self-Reflective. The Leadership Development theme was characterized by 1) Role Models Professional and Personal, 2) Involvement and Networking, and 3) Workshops. **Conclusions:** Leaders in athletic training self-report that they possess strong personal attributes, take pride in the success of others, and demonstrate sound decision-making, which is described as honorable. Future leaders should emulate these attributes as they mature in the profession. Engaging in professional development and role modeling of past mentors helps leaders develop their skills.

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### Author Bio(s)

W. David Carr, PhD, ATC, is an Associate Professor in Public Health and Sports Medicine at Missouri State University in Springfield, MO. He is also a licensed Athletic Trainer in the state of Missouri.

Tona Hetzler, EdD, ATC is a Department Head and Professor in Public Health and Sports Medicine at Missouri State University in Springfield, MO. She is also a licensed Athletic Trainer in the state of Missouri.

Stephanie M. Singe, PhD, ATC is an Associate Professor in the Department of Kinesiology at the University of Connecticut in Storrs, CT. She is also a licensed Athletic Trainer in the state of Connecticut.

William A. Pitney III, EdD, ATC is an Associate Dean in the College of Education and a Professor in the Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education at Northern Illinois University. He is also a licensed Athletic Trainer in the state of Illinois.

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W. David Carr<sup>1</sup>  
Tona Hetzler<sup>1</sup>  
Stephanie M. Singe<sup>2</sup>  
William Pitney<sup>3</sup>

1. Missouri State University
2. University of Connecticut
3. Northern Illinois University

United States

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose** The purpose of this study was to explore how athletic trainers describe their leadership and how the profession can develop future leaders. **Methods:** Eight participants (four females, four males) completed a phone interview. Interview data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed utilizing a grounded theory approach. The trustworthiness of the data was established by using member checks and triangulation. **Results:** Characteristics of Leadership theme was defined as 1) Interpersonal Skills, 2) Vision, 3) Pride in Others' Success, 4) Ethical Decision Making, and 5) Self-Reflective. The Leadership Development theme was characterized by 1) Role Models Professional and Personal, 2) Involvement and Networking, and 3) Workshops. **Conclusions:** Leaders in athletic training self-report that they possess strong personal attributes, take pride in the success of others, and demonstrate sound decision-making, which is described as honorable. Future leaders should emulate these attributes as they mature in the profession. Engaging in professional development and role modeling of past mentors helps leaders develop their skills.

**Keywords:** interpersonal skills, vision, ethical decision making, self-reflective

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## INTRODUCTION

Leadership is one of the most researched topics in the literature,<sup>1-3</sup> yet might be one of the hardest to conceptualize because as Kutz<sup>4</sup> suggests, it is polarizing and has many intricacies to consider. Leadership is a critical aspect of the athletic training profession; when leaders are effective and competent, there is improved job satisfaction through better working conditions and better quality of care delivered to the patient.<sup>1,5,6</sup>

Underpinning leadership, regardless of the discipline, is the ability to influence an individual's behaviors or actions to affect others.<sup>4</sup> Forty-nine leadership behaviors have been identified for effective athletic training clinical practice, with the thought that these behaviors promote leadership and positively influence the delivery of patient care.<sup>7</sup> Leadership has been explored from multiple contexts, including techniques and principles of leadership,<sup>8</sup> situational leadership,<sup>9</sup> characteristics of effective clinical teaching,<sup>9</sup> leadership behaviors of athletic trainers compared to other fields,<sup>10</sup> leadership education within professional athletic training programs,<sup>11</sup> transformational leadership,<sup>12</sup> students' perspective of leadership,<sup>13</sup> and leadership as a catalyst for change.<sup>14</sup> While each of these articles<sup>7-14</sup> has contributed to the expanding knowledge of leadership in the athletic training profession, none have explored how the profession can assist in developing leadership.

Leadership within athletic training can be seen from two distinct vantage points: leadership role which is appointed (i.e. role within organization), or leadership roles that have been sought after, that are independent of employment (i.e. service in committees). Most of the aforementioned literature has examined leadership from the context of behaviors or types of leaders, yet little has been done on how an athletic trainer develops into a leader. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how athletic trainers describe their path to leadership, their leadership skills and views, and how the athletic training profession can assist in developing leadership.

## METHODS

### Design

The leadership journey has been described as personal and individualized,<sup>15</sup> so a qualitative approach was the selected method to best understand leadership development. Specifically, a descriptive case study design<sup>16</sup> was used to learn more about the perspectives of eight established leaders. The research team was comprised of four individuals with an extensive background in qualitative research with a balance of male and female representation. An IRB panel approved this project, and all participants completed a signed consent form before data collection.

### Participants and Recruitment

We used a purposeful sampling strategy<sup>16</sup> that was based upon a pre-determined inclusion criterion that included engagement in leadership activities, participation in leadership roles, and membership in the NATA Hall of Fame. Individuals in the profession of athletic training who have been given the distinction of Hall of Fame have shaped the profession through their professional accomplishments over a 30+ year career. The implication, thus, is that the individual has demonstrated certain qualities and has accepted leadership roles and positions in the profession to advanced athletic training, and their perspectives serve to provide insight and understanding. We also wanted to have a balanced gender perspective and recruited four males and four females. A list of potential participants was discussed amongst the research team, and the eight chosen participants were solicited via an initial email/phone call to determine availability and interest. Participants are described in Table 1. Pseudonyms are used to reduce bias.

**Table 1.** Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Years Certified	Notable Leadership Activity
Janet	NR	Female	NR	Membership Association Board
Margaret	70	Female	48	Membership Association Board
Penny	NR	Female	NR	Accreditation Board
Phoebe	73	Female	41	Membership Association Committee Chair
Gerard	82	Male	46	Membership Association Committee Chair
Devin	65	Male	42	Journal Editorial Board, Academic leadership
Mark	NR	Male	NR	International Association Board, Academic leadership
Patrick	68	Male	47	Accreditation and Certification Board

### Data Collection Procedures

A structured interview protocol was developed before the data collection by the a member of the research team to represent the study's aims and current literature on leadership. Then the remaining researchers completed a content review of the interview guide to ensure clarity and accuracy in the questions. The research team made no edits and agreed with the final protocol (Table 2). All eight study participants completed interviews with the primary researcher. Divergence was encouraged as each participant was allowed to express his or her opinions. Probing questions were utilized to expand upon responses and ensure clarity when necessary. Interviews ranged from 20 to 30 minutes and were conducted in a controlled environment free from distraction and were recorded on a digital audio recorder.

**Table 2.** Interview Protocol

Questions
In your opinion, what attributes make an effective leader? Can you provide examples of people who fit these criteria of an effective leader?
Have you worked with someone who you believe to be an effective leader? If yes, what attributes and characteristics did they possess? Did that have an impact on your development as a leader?
How would you describe yourself as a leader? What is your approach?
How do you believe others have benefitted from your leadership?
What were the most critical or noteworthy experiences you had early in your career that influenced your leadership ability?
In what way did your formal education influence you as a leader?
What informal experiences did you have that influenced your leadership ability?
How would you advise young professionals who want to become leaders in Athletic Training?
What can the profession do to support leadership development in Athletic Training?

### Data Analysis

A research assistant transcribed the audiotapes verbatim, and the researcher that conducted the interviews reviewed them for accuracy. Two researchers (WDC and SMS) reviewed the entire transcripts to become familiar with the content, a process termed immersion. Data were analyzed by coding each participant's response with a 1 to 3-word description of the meaning or theme. Using an open coding scheme, both researchers independently created a theme for each comment. Before the coding process, the two researchers discussed the process and agreed.

### Data Credibility

Researchers completed peer debriefings and member checks to enhance the validity and trustworthiness of the data analysis. Two researchers independently reviewed and coded the transcripts. Both researchers discussed the coding and themes that emerged from the transcripts. Disagreements occurred with less than 10% of the coded themes. Minor differences in the terminology used for the identified themes were resolved through this process. Inter-rater reliability was not calculated as both authors were coding the same transcripts, and a consensus was reached on each coded entry. As the researchers discussed coding themes, it was felt that saturation was achieved as no new themes emerged from the transcripts. The peer debriefing process allowed the researchers to analyze the transcripts without influencing the results. Member checks were completed by asking each participant to review the coded themes and example quotes for consistency and accuracy.

## RESULTS

The participants were encouraged to openly discuss their perspectives on leadership development in the Athletic Training profession. Two higher-order themes emerged from the data analysis: 1) *characteristics of leaders* and 2) *leadership development*. Several subthemes summarized each of the major themes. A description of each theme follows with supporting quotes from our participants to support each theme. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of each participant.

### **Characteristics of Leaders**

Characteristics of leaders were operationalized as those traits and qualities held by individuals that position themselves to lead others. Consistent amongst our participants are 1) interpersonal skills, 2) vision, 3) pride in others' success, and 4) ethical decision making. Each lower order theme is presented below along with supporting quotes.

#### ***Interpersonal Skills***

The interpersonal skills subtheme is defined as skills that one needs to interact with others, or in this case, to lead and include, such as communication and listening. Patrick noted, "They are effective and timely in their communication." The leadership factors that emerged from the participants were centered on personality characteristics (i.e., honesty, ethical) and people skills (i.e., communication, rapport). Gerard stated:

"Good character, honesty, integrity, etc., I think come to mind first, and that is not exclusive to leadership but any area, but I think that is pretty basic. I would have to say good interpersonal relationships skills."

Janet shared, "... the most effective leader is the ability to communicate, and so I really embraced that and learned so much more about the attributes of communication, listening skills, setting an example."

Patrick continued, "They are...definitely open and actively soliciting feedback and ideas from others", "...they work really hard at giving feedback both positive as well as negative and constructive feedback".

#### ***Vision***

The vision subtheme was described as leaders must have a vision -- a goal that can help advance the profession. The participants spoke of the need for ideas for facilitating growth, change, or promotion of the field. Devin noted:

"Most important to me is vision. You (as a leader) must see beyond where (we are as a profession), where there might be an issue."

Mark shared, "I think [a good leader has] the usual stuff, vision, know where they want to go. More importantly, they know how to get people to work together towards a common vision. Keep folks moving forward."

Gerard stated, "I think organizational skills are important, but I feel one that is very important is vision and looking forward, thinking of plans to get where you want to go."

#### ***Pride in Others' Success***

The pride in success of others subtheme was described as leaders will take pride in the success of their followers. Penny stated, "They are advocates as well as cheerleaders for their people." Participants spoke of their pride and satisfaction for those whom they worked with, mentored, or supervised. Devin stated:

"The most gratifying experience I have had in my career is watching graduate students go out, and blossom and have great careers and make an impact on their profession. The older I've gotten and the farther along in my career, the more important that's all been, it's not been about me, but people around me are successful."

Gerard noted, "my success of my graduates over the years has been very gratifying for me to see, and those are the graduates from the NATA accredited graduate Athletic Training program. I'd look at some of my grads there as well as..., and some of them have gone on to the Hall of Fame throughout the years..."

Penny continued, "one of the biggest things is that they respect and appreciate and recognize publicly the gifts of the people that they are working with, and they basically make sure that others respect those individuals".

#### ***Ethical Decision Making***

Participants conveyed that leaders must demonstrate ethical and moral decision-making. Phoebe stated, "[How would others describe your leadership] I would hope, open and honest, somebody who gave them a chance to grow in their own leadership abilities." The importance of good character through their decisions and choices while leading was discussed. Janet stated:

"...I think good leaders lead by being men and women of character, and if I could really give one of the number one attributes I really want to be known for, are being a woman of character, of honesty, integrity, loyalty..."

Margaret shared, "[What attributes or characteristics did...have?] He...never ever disrespected another person's opinion. He was a quiet leader, and I know we all have to develop different leadership styles, but I really respected that quiet leadership, and quietly guiding and perusing different goals that weren't a flashy style at all and weren't a hey look at me, it was hey lets together address some of these issues and build a better program."

### ***Self-Reflective***

The self-reflective subtheme was defined as a leader's ability to recognize their limitations and to surround themselves with others that complimented their limitations. Janet noted:

"...I hire my staff for the skills that I do not have, they are great practitioners, they are great clinicians, but I know the skills that I bring to the table..."

Gerard shared, "Probably the most important thing is I have seen myself surrounding myself with good people..."

Devin reported, "I think it is important to surround oneself with really good and strong people that will feel comfortable to tell the leader what he or she needs to hear..."

### **Leadership Development**

Participants discussed how one's development of a leader can occur. Essentially, leadership development can occur through informal personal interactions with others via role modeling and networking and more formal approaches such as workshops.

### ***Role Models - Professional***

The role models-professional subtheme was defined as leaders develop their leadership style from their role models and mentors in the profession. Margaret noted, "So in my early years, I had some outstanding role models." Participants highlighted individuals and experiences that made a difference in their development. Margaret continued:

"leadership is a lifetime journey.", "But I really observed ...and tried to build in some of those skills as I was becoming a leader and trying different styles."

Penny shared, "[My mentors] they possessed attributes to make an effective leader [visionaries, effective communicators]...though not all people demonstrated all the traits all the time...for it was not appropriate for what they were doing... I think that helped me develop, you know, basically they modeled behavior. Both the behavior to do and the behavior not to do."

Devin stated, "Strong leaders in my first job, and then over my career, I had other deans and provost and so forth that were very good, and I had some that were not very good. I learned a lot from both categories." "You try to emulate those characteristics and attributes that you find most attractive and most effective, and you try to do just the opposite in those that are not effective."

### ***Role Models – Personal***

The role models-personal subtheme was defined as leaders develop their leadership style from their role models and mentors in their personal life. Penny shared, "My parents were also very engaged civically and, in our community, so they were role models and mentors that I had growing up." Participants highlighted family members and experiences that made a difference in their development. Patrick stated:

"One of the other things I had early on was obviously my father, that was a Lutheran minister. I saw what he did to lead a congregation."

Phoebe noted, "That said, my parents...as most people would agree, that their parents are certainly role models.", "My dad was very active in the community."

### ***Involvement and Networking***

The involvement and networking subtheme was defined as leaders develop their leadership style through service and networking. Phoebe said, "I would encourage first of all that they attend professional meetings, they sit in the meeting, you do not just go to the meeting, and get involved, get engaged." Participants discussed how getting out and meeting other professionals aided in their development. Janet stated:

"I do think the young professionals in Athletic Training today are different; there are changes with the young professionals coming in, good and bad. So what would I advise young people? I would advise continuing to be as engaged and involved in exposing yourself to this profession as much as you can."

Phoebe continued, "I think it is important for the younger professionals to realize that the leaders, when they were their age, were just like that, they did not know many things, they did not know many people, they did not know how to get into the leadership roles they are in now, but they were and maybe even hesitant, but they pursued what they thought was right and as they got into the profession they were recognized."

Devin noted, "Well, first is to get involved and do not underestimate your ability to be a contributor. And I would point again to that letter I wrote...the guy who did not know me and I was a very young professional at the time, and that was a very presumptuous offer on my part, but there you go I got appointed to a committee and got more involved as time went on."

### ***Workshops***

The participants explained that one influential aspect of their leadership style development was through workshops and activities. Devin noted, "For example, in some other fields, you find department chair leadership workshops." Participants talked about formal programs in leadership development that are needed to develop future generations of leaders. Margaret shared:

"I think some of the early programs, I believe it is called ILEAD, during the time we were really trying to engage young professionals, I think that was so effective, I think really developing formal leadership experience is critical for the next wave of leaders in our profession. I think the more they can do of that, the better."

Devin continued, "I think that mentoring programs are really important, and I've known I've seen the one they are doing for research faculty now, but I'm not sure if we are doing much in terms of cultivating leaders through mentoring programs."

Gerard noted, "...there are always some comments that nobody wants to volunteer and nobody wants to get involved, and I said maybe we should recruit more all of us in each state. Then the district came up with some ways to identify potential leaders and reach out to them and encourage them to get involved in training programs, workshops, conferences, things like that."

## **DISCUSSION**

Role modeling and learning from others is a common way to develop specific skills, attitudes, and behaviors.<sup>17</sup> The NATA Hall of Fame distinction represents a person who has made significant contributions to the profession of athletic training, often through their leadership and accomplishments. For this reason, learning from their experiences can help others develop as leaders themselves. Our findings speak to the importance of personal attributes as well as the self-directed nature of developing into a leader role. Many of the personal attributes self-identified by our leaders speak to characteristics that embody transformational leadership which include passion, vision, emotional intelligence, and motivation to help others achieve their goals.<sup>18,19</sup> Our leaders used a multifaceted approach to improving their skills as leaders.

### **Important Characteristics of Leaders**

#### ***Interpersonal Skills***

Our participants articulated their perspective that interpersonal skills of communication and listening are essential characteristics of influential leaders. Interpersonal skills relate to building and maintaining relationships with others. Indeed, building and creating relationships is often shared among a list of competencies possessed by leaders.<sup>20</sup> Paramount to developing relationships is the ability to listen and communicate with others. Spears<sup>21</sup> (p. 27) writes that leaders have "traditionally been valued for their communication and decision-making skills." Further, Spears suggests



that leaders, particularly servant leaders, strive to "understand and empathize with others" and that the most successful leaders are those who are "skilled, empathetic listeners."<sup>21</sup> (p. 27)

### ***Vision***

Creating a vision has long been associated with leadership practices.<sup>22</sup> The idea of directing change by creating a vision to share with others has long been a differentiating component between management and leadership.<sup>23</sup>(pg 9) The underlying aspect of vision, as it relates to leadership, is that people can be inspired to engage in meaningful and purposeful activity<sup>24</sup> Through developing shared values and a sense of doing something purposeful, shared visions "are compelling, bringing out courage people did not realize they had."<sup>24</sup>(pg 73) Leaders use their vision to bridge current circumstances to the future of an association or organization.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Pride in Others' Success***

Transformational leaders are influential due to helping followers perform beyond expectations.<sup>26</sup> Our participants conveyed that this was a particularly important characteristic amongst NATA Hall of Fame members and noted that they felt a great deal of pride in seeing followers develop their abilities and succeed in their endeavors. Transformational leadership results from meaningful social exchanges between a leader and follower and strengthens the common identity of a workgroup which leads to helping behaviors.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Ethical Decision Making***

Ethical and moral behaviors and actions are common attributes associated with those individuals who role model, or serve as a leader.<sup>7,28,29</sup> The act of leadership signifies followers believing, trusting, and buying into the leader's vision or actions; thus, our finding that our participants recognize this as necessary is reassuring as they recognize its importance as a leader. Additionally, our participants identified one's character as an essential component of leadership. Character is a collection of personal qualities along with moral values.<sup>30</sup> However, one's moral values are conveyed in communicating with others, either verbally or nonverbally, or through their actions.

### ***Self-Reflective***

Critical self-reflection has been identified as a key component to leadership.<sup>31</sup> Leaders that are capable of self-reflection are receptive to critical review, can learn from mistakes, and grow as leaders. Our participants noted that they hire people that compliment weaknesses in their own skill sets. To identify the needed skill sets, a leader must be critical of their own abilities and challenge their perceptions.<sup>31</sup> Through reflection, our participants recognized their own limitations and looked to hire others to complement their abilities and help the organization.

### ***Development of Leaders***

From the perspective of our participants, leadership is developed in many ways. Specifically, our participants believed that role models, professional engagement/involvement, and formal programming were all avenues to develop leaders.

### ***Role Models – Professional and Personal***

Our participants conveyed that having a role model was critical to their leadership development. Role models were identified as both professional and personal but were all discussed in the context of their career experiences. Role models are an important antecedent to leadership development. For example, Brown and Trevino<sup>32</sup> found a relationship between leaders who reported having an ethical role model during their career and being rated as ethical leaders themselves by their followers.

### ***Involvement and Networking***

Participants explained that through professional involvement and engagement, leadership skills are developed. Indeed "the primary source of learning to lead, to the extent that leadership can be learned, is experience."<sup>33</sup> For our participants, experiencing professional engagement and involvement in the profession was a key component of learning to lead. This aligns with the work of Astin<sup>34</sup>, who studied the leadership development of college students. The investment of emotional and physical energy in one's service, memberships, and activities substantially influences leadership development.<sup>35</sup> Involvement and engagement in the profession allow individuals to engage in experiential learning—a pivotal approach to leadership development.<sup>36</sup>

### ***Workshops***

Athletic trainers are expected to be life-long learners and often attend conferences, workshops, and other continuing education forms to grow professionally. Kutz<sup>7</sup> suggested that ambition is a key attribute of a leader, whereby athletic

trainers should promote their professional development. Finding that the participants recognized the need to engage in opportunities to grow their leadership skills and knowledge aligns with the theory of life-long learning and self-directed learning. Self-directed learning is also a principle of andragogy, which again applies to the participants as adult learners. Additionally, although leadership is an inherent part of everyone<sup>37</sup>, researchers who have examined leadership suggest individuals who succeed must also have some formal training or nurturing<sup>38-40</sup> (i.e., through mentoring) to fully appreciate those skills in a leadership capacity.

### Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Qualitative research methodology inherently has small sample sizes, guided by data saturation. Although we reached this in our study, we feel continued research is needed to thoroughly understand leadership development in the profession. Our sample only included those members who had been awarded NATA Hall of Fame as an indication of leadership. So, those who assume leadership roles and do not have this distinction could have similar or juxtaposed experiences, and their stories should be examined. Future research needs to include a blend of methodologies, as well as various criteria assessing leadership development.

### CONCLUSIONS

The current study results demonstrate that the leaders studied possess strong personal attributes, take pride in the success of others, and demonstrate sound decision-making, which is described as honorable. Additionally, each stated a need to engage in professional development and guidance from a role model to strengthen their leadership skills. These findings have implications for all athletic trainers regardless of work setting or title as they reiterate the importance of professional development and strong network or role models. The findings also highlight that leadership can be developed and that all individuals can utilize leadership skills, not just those with official titles. Athletic trainers and sports medicine professionals should reflect on the role they play within their institution and understand that regardless of that role, they can provide leadership. Furthermore, they should invest time and effort in developing leadership skills by participating in various activities. Serving as a mentor to new professionals and attending networking events can be rewarding personally and professionally.

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