

ABOVE THE LINE

By Urban Meyer

The defining characteristic of every championship team is leadership. Leadership isn't a difference maker, it is *the* difference maker.

Leadership is influence based on trust that you have earned.

There is a red line at the edge of our practice field. Every day before practice, I stand at that red line and watch guys take the field. The rule is that once they cross that red line, they are not only running – they are prepared to give all they've got. If I don't like somebody's demeanor – it could be body language, a look on a guy's face, anything – I turn him around and point to the locker room. You better be ready to go; otherwise, don't come on the practice field.

Leadership is a skill and like all skills it takes time and effort to develop. The timeworn quotes that have been hanging in your locker rooms for years are not nearly enough. Now I understand. Average leaders have quotes. Good leaders have a plan. Exceptional leaders have a system.

Clarity of Purpose: Think hard, be as specific as possible. Ask yourself: "Exactly what is it that I am after every day?"

Ohio State Clarity of Purpose: Nine Units Strong

[Intentional, On Purpose, Skillful]

ABOVE THE LINE

BELOW THE LINE

[Impulsive, On Autopilot, Resistant]

The performance of a team rises or falls on behavior. Winning behavior is intentional, on purpose and skillful. It is Above the Line. But it's easier to be impulsive, on autopilot and resistant. This is Below the Line. Below the Line is dangerous, because it is comfortable and convenient. It is the path of least resistance.

Above the Line behavior is conscious and thoughtful – a choice made in alignment with your larger vision or where you want to go. Below the Line behavior is directed by impulse or the gravitational pull of old habits; you just react without thinking. Below the Line is your default response.

It isn't hard to find people who are caught up in Below the Line behavior. All you need to do is look for those whose first reaction is to **blame** (others), **complain** (about circumstances), and **defend** (yourself) or BCD.

$E + R = O$ (Event + Response = Outcome)

We don't control the events in life and we don't directly control the outcomes. But we always have control over how we choose to respond.

Simply stated, Big Es and Big Os require Big Rs.

How you respond: Calls it the "R Factor."

Six R Factor Disciplines they teach to players:

1. Press Pause – gives you time to think, gets you off autopilot, avoid doing something foolish or harmful, focus on acting with purpose
2. Get Your Mind Right – What you focus on, how you talk to yourself, productive vs negative mindset, Irritated Mindset or Survival Mindset (both below the line) vs. Purpose mindset (above the line)
3. Step Up – Understand the situation, understand what is required of you and respond above the line
4. Adjust & Adapt – Consider current path of your R Factor habits. Where are they taking you? Where do you want to go? Adjust.
5. Make a Difference – take complete ownership of the experience you give others and your contribution to the team's culture
6. Build Skill – Elite performers build skill above their talents. Talent is a gift, greatness is a choice.

Under pressure, we do not rise to the occasion. We rise or fall to the level of our training.

When contact is made, it is too late to train and build skill. We must prepare and develop our R Factor capacity before we experience challenging situations. Under pressure, the R Factor habits that will be available to you are the ones you have purposefully built into your life.

A rapidly changing world deals ruthlessly with people who fail to adapt. If you don't like change, you are going to like irrelevance even less.

Exceptional performance is the result of an uncommon level of focus and discipline in the pursuit of greatness.

Victory Meal (day after wins): The idea is to have a really nice postgame meal where the players can go and have fun and the coaches can relax and enjoy themselves, too.

“I see better than I hear”

Andrew Luck: “Your actions are so loud I can't hear what you are saying.”

We are not measured by our intentions, but by our actions.

Embrace productive discomfort. Discomfort marks the place where the old way meets the new way. Push through the pain. If it doesn't challenge you, it will not change you.

The way you respond creates the culture. This means you must respond with intention, purpose and skill.

Culture by design (respond with above the line behavior) vs culture by default

Performance Pathway: Leaders → Culture → Behavior → RESULTS

Leaders create culture, culture drives behavior, behavior produces results.

By Urban Meyer

*Reinforcement loop between culture and behavior. Behavior reinforces the culture that creates it. → This effect can work for you or against you.

Our message was clear [to assistant coaches]: the performance of the players in your unit is a reflection of the culture you create.

The foundation of culture is core beliefs. Not platitudes or quotes. Core beliefs. The beliefs that are the heart of the team.

Culture is what leads when no one is watching.

Ohio State core beliefs: relentless effort, competitive excellence, power of the unit

Four to six, A to B: How Urban defines relentless effort – time duration (4 to 6 seconds, average football play) and direction (a to b)

Competitive excellence: constant focus on mental reps and game reps, mindset of a winner

Power of the unit: uncommon commitment to each other and to the work necessary to achieve our purpose.

Building a culture is a three part process:

1. Believe it.
2. Sell it.
3. Demand it.

If you permit it, you promote it. Challenge below the line behavior. Recognize and reinforce above the line behavior.

When taking over a program: show respect and move on. Your job is to lead and coach, not assess or dissect your predecessor's shortcomings.

After taking over, 5 players missed first meeting and a bunch were late to second:

Wanted to find out who was with him and who wasn't at first. Outside in freezing rain on first week at 5 AM, 400 yards of bear crawls. Had to wear practice gear inside out until they earned it. Had to earn locker room and change in car first week.

At Ohio State we have made relentless effort part of our DNA, and here is why: great effort can overcome poor execution, but great execution cannot overcome poor effort.

Every player is required to be engaged in the drill. If you're not taking the physical rep, you're taking the mental rep. There are no wasted reps.

You will play like you practice. You can't practice on autopilot and play with purpose. How you compete in practice with determine how you compete in games.

What motivates a player to give maximum effort and play with selfless commitment to the team? I believe the key to solving the mystery lies in something called small-unit cohesion.

The military has the same challenge we do, except they call it combat motivation. What motivates soldiers to engage in combat? How do you train soldiers to fight and win? How do you train and equip soldiers to sustain combat motivation during periods of prolonged conflict?

The strongest motivation for enduring combat, especially for U.S. soldiers, is the bond formed among members of a squad or platoon. This cohesion is the single most important sustaining and motivating force for combat soldiers. Simply put, soldiers fight because of the other members of their small unit.” – US Army Major Robert J. Reilly, Nov-Dec, 2000 issue of Military Review

The true soldier fights not because he hates what is in front of him, but because he loves what is behind him.

Trust is something that every team talks about and wants, but few truly get. Trust is belief in the reliability of a person. It is confidence that you can count on a person.

In order to train and compete at an elite level, you must push each other hard. Very hard. But you can push only to the level of trust you have built with each other and your coaches.

To his coaches: The core message was very straightforward: trust is earned through your behavior, not granted by your position. And it is earned through repeated behavior over time.

Build trust (Need all 3, strength in one cannot make up for weakness in another):

1. Character – ethical trust. Built through repeated experience of you doing what you say you will do.
2. Competence – technical trust. Built through repeated experience of you doing your job and making team better.
3. Connection – personal trust. Built through repeated experience of caring, listening and fully engaging with the people on the team.

It is important to remember that players do not experience your intentions; they experience your behavior. If players are going to trust you, they must experience your character and competence, and they must experience a personal connection with you. Repeatedly. Over time. Especially in difficult conditions.

“Remember, guys, when contact is made and the bullets start flying, it all comes down to training and how much you trust each other” – Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Harris to Ohio State team

Alignment: When a team is aligned, everyone understands and is fully committed to the team’s purpose, culture and strategy.

An aligned organization gets things done faster and with better results and is more agile and responsive to the competitive environment.

By Urban Meyer

Each player and each unit is moving in a particular direction. The task of a leader is to provide a center of gravity that exerts a pull – attraction and energy – that aligns the trajectory of every player and unit. In other words, it's leadership that gets every player and every unit on the team going in the same direction.

Need the right amount of leadership energy.

- Too much energy, too much pull = impairs developmental momentum and slows down players. Micromanagers. Heavy handed and harsh. **Result** – disconnect, discourage and demotivate players.
- Too little energy, too little pull = players spin off in all directions. Laissez-faire leaders. Standards are unclear and don't hold players accountable. Lenient, soft and want to be friends with players. **Result** – allow an undisciplined culture.

How to get alignment:

- Hire the right people and recruit the right players
- Communicate your purpose and your culture with exceptional clarity and relentless consistency.
- Make it clear to your leaders that it is their responsibility to build and maintain alignment and equip them with essential skills.
- Hold everyone accountable. If someone is out of alignment, deal with it quickly and decisively.

10-80-10 principle:

- Top 10 percenters: nucleus of team, give all they've got, all of the time, essence of self discipline, self respect and the relentless pursuit of improvement – the elite.
- 80 percenters: the majority, go to work, do a good job, relatively reliable. Trustworthy and dutiful, but don't have the drive and unbending will of top 10 percent
- Bottom 10 percenters: uninterested or defiant, coasting through life, not caring about reaching potential or honoring gifts they've been given. Coach killers.

Leadership challenge: Move as many of the 80 percenters as possible into the top 10.

Spend most of your time as a leader on 80 percenters. Top 10 percenters motivate themselves and bottom ten percenters are not worth wasting energy on.

“I can't relate to lazy people. We don't speak the same language. I don't understand you. I don't want to understand you.” – Kobe Bryant

I like having talented players as much as the next coach. That said, I think that we tend to overrate the importance of talent.

Not a single starter for either team in Super Bowl XLIX was rated a five-star recruit out of high school.

Four approaches to moving 80 percenters into top 10:

1. Mastery and Belief
 - a. Players need to believe it will be worth it to join the elites

- b. Position coaches have pictures of NFL players they have coached on walls as reminders/motivation
 - c. Message: “This could be you. All you need to do is work, train and live Above the Line. Be as fully committed to getting better as the guys whose pictures you are looking at.”
2. Harness the Power
- a. Most people will keep the company of like-minded people (i.e. 10 percenters with 10 percenters, 80 percenters with 80 percenters...)
 - b. Pair top 10 percenters with 80 percenters as often as possible in workouts, drills, meetings
 - c. Harness the power of the elites in your program
 - d. John Simon came in and lifted at 6 AM by himself every day. Urban told him he couldn't do that any more unless he brought someone with him.
 - e. Top 10 percenters not allowed in the weight room unless they bring an 80 percenter with them
3. Building Ownership
- a. Player or employee gives maximum effort when he feels an ownership stake in what's going on
 - b. Give 80 percenters more ownership (include on ring design committee, decisions about jersey styles, training table menus, etc.)
 - c. The more people that share ownership, the more that will be loyal and committed
4. Positive Peer Pressure
- a. Everybody is pushing each other to get better.
 - b. If you are going through the motions, staying in the same place, there's a good chance somebody is going to move right past you.

Told Michael Thomas: “You can be one of the best receivers in the country. It's up to you. I know you have big dreams. I want to help you fulfill them. But if your habits don't reflect your dreams and goals, you can either change your habits or change your dreams and goals.”

Would occasionally make sure the defense was in the wrong call for a certain play in practice in order to boost an offensive player's confidence. – “Small victories can play a major role when you have a player who is dealing with the stress of change or even some other issue. Do whatever you can to reinforce someone's confidence by helping him achieve small victories. So much of leadership comes down to knowing the people you are leading and providing them with what they need to succeed.”

“A public opinion poll is no substitute for thought.” – Warren Buffett

Every great leader I have been around or studied has demonstrated the unique ability to think. To think deeply, originally, and often, bravely. Leadership is a mindset first and a skillset second. If you don't think like a leader, you won't act like one.

Champions Day:

- Never make winning a championship a goal or bring it up, except for one day

By Urban Meyer

- “is about creating a vision, a crystal-clear picture of what winning a championship looks like and feels like.”
- Centerpiece is a video showing champions in variety of sports celebrating their glory
- Purpose: Give every player and every unit leader a chance to observe testimony of the amount of work, commitment and sheer toughness it takes to win a championship.
- Video takes you inside winning locker room, because otherwise it’s impossible to imagine
- Bring in guest speaker who has won a championship (ex: Billy Donovan, Bob Knight, Doc Rivers)

Dan Gilbert (owner of Cavs and Quicken) gives his IT department four hours every week of break time to think of ideas that might help the company. Earlier in his career he used to drive his people to find broken things and fix them, now he wants them to look ahead and come up with better ideas.

Exceptional leaders think about common things in an uncommon way.

Belief, I have come to learn, is a critical component in success. Research shows that the highest levels of human performance are empowered by the deepest levels of belief. When a player practices and plays with belief, he performs faster, smarter, better.

“The brick walls are there for a reason. The brick walls are not there to keep us out. The brick walls are there to give us a chance to show how badly we want something. The brick walls are there to stop the people who don’t want it badly enough.” – Randy Pausch

Special teams featured players from all different units (linebackers, wide receivers, etc.) all playing together, so Meyer needed something to unify them and make them feel like a unit that needed to play for each other. So they used the clicker.

“We wanted to reinforce the idea that they were a specially chosen unit, a band of brothers, going into battle behind enemy lines. Those players were so close to each other. They knew the only way they get through battle, to win that game, was if they fought for each other.” – Ohio State video coordinator David Trichel.

All special teams players had a clicker – when passing one another would click once and return with 2 clicks.

The clicker: As the US troops were preparing to invade Normandy on D-Day in 1944, the 82nd Airborne dropped behind enemy lines at pre-dawn to start early disrupting of enemy supply lines and scouting of strategic positions. Because it was so dark and the conditions were overcast, it was likely that many of the paratroopers would not land exactly where planned (and that ended up being the case). Each paratrooper was given a small brass clicker before jumping and knew to click it, creating a cricket-like sound if they heard another person. If two clicks were returned, it was a friendly. If two clicks were not returned, the paratrooper knew that he was coming upon a foe.

Here’s the great secret about leadership: it’s not about you. It’s about making other people better. Leadership is more about trust you have earned than the authority you have been granted.