

Crew Chiefs Are

The NBA has formalized a leadership program, with the help of a former crew chief, to better develop its staff.



Made...

By Dave Simon

In Las Vegas last summer, Bob Delaney was observing officials for the NBA, and was approached by Mike Bantom, NBA executive vice president of referee operations; Joe Borgia, NBA vice president of referee operations; and Don Vaden, NBA vice president and director of officials, and asked to speak to the younger officials at the camp. Little did he know where it would lead.

Delaney, an ex-NBA crew chief, serves as a consultant to the league on officiating issues, and speaks around the country on leadership. That's the area that the three members of the NBA staff in charge of improving officiating wanted Delaney to address.

He gave an overview on leadership and stress, focusing on how it affected him as a former undercover police officer and NBA official, and the ways military veterans address it. Afterward, Bantom spoke with Delaney, noting his message would be of benefit to all officials, and asking him to dig deeper into creating a formal program to help improve officiating.

As he began mulling over what to put into a presentation, Delaney wondered about how he got to be a crew chief. "In football, basketball, hockey, we get designated, anointed, but there is no formal training. The conversation with Mike Bantom centered on that — how to develop a crew chief and Mike had the vision for a leadership development program," Delaney explained. Defining leadership became the centerpiece of a program Delaney introduced to the NBA's crew chiefs.

Getting There

Getting from the discussion with Bantom to the development of a full leadership program took time and thought for Delaney, who now serves in the official capacity as an adviser for the NBA's Crew Chief Leadership Development Program.

Over the years, he has worked with military leaders such as Joe LeBoeuf, retired U.S. military colonel and professor in Duke's business leadership program, as well as Ray Odierno, U.S. Army chief of staff; Jim Kouzes, professor of leadership, Santa Clara University, and noted leadership expert and bestselling author John Maxwell. His experiences led him down the path of how leaders influence others, improve the actions of others and leave a positive legacy. He also looked at how to influence others, whether by example, words or crucial conversations.

"We have to have conversations when there are concerns about what went on in the game. If we bury them, we don't do a service to the game. Now we've formalized what used to be informal in the NBA," Delaney said.

The Formula and the Meeting

Bantom and Delaney rolled out the program at the September 2013 preseason meetings. Three sessions were scheduled and one session was to feature a panel discussion with current and former NBA crew chiefs, including Scott Foster, Monty McCutchen, Steve Javie and Dan and Joe Crawford (no relation).

A key formula was introduced, one used to frame the discussion and build the program as it moves forward: Experiences + Intellectual Readiness + Reflection = Development.

Delaney explained sharing and learning from experiences is the first step for quality leadership, which then must combine with preparation and formal study for intellectual readiness. Delaney's formal study earned him

took questions from the floor. There was so much discussion, we ran out of time. We want to build some of the lessons from the panel session into our classroom setting for next year," Delaney said.

He found the younger officials seeking mentoring, and many questions were asked on individual weaknesses. "The panel opened up, and I think that helped them individually and the group

collectively. The dynamics allowed for the conversation to go deeper," he said.

NBA official Bennett Salvatore said gaining from others' experiences helps officials learn and become better leaders. "There was a lot of great information from Bob and his experiences from the lives of others. The program helps us learn how to pick up certain pieces from others' games and incorporate it into our own, using your personality as a foundation," Salvatore said.

NBA crew chief Marc Davis said the program created greater buy-in from all officials. "You don't

have to be sick to get better. All organizations and companies can benefit from the program. You don't need to have problems to focus on improvement," Davis said.

Davis said that becoming a crew chief becomes a point of validation, and leadership is one aspect of that. "It's not about you, but the people you serve, whether it's your officiating crew or your company," he said. "The people you are tasked to lead should be your primary objective."

Davis said he has learned from the program that leaders need to be taught effective skills and strategies to be successful. "All leaders have dynamic personalities, but the nuts and bolts of leadership need to be taught," he said. "There are two types of leaders: effective and ineffective. We have to focus on creating an environment for our crew to maximize the team's capabilities and perform at the highest levels."

Awareness of your role as a leader

was another takeaway, according to NBA crew chief Scott Foster. "We've learned how to break down the defense mechanisms of our crew," Foster said. "I get after it all the time, so I have to learn how to deal with other types and react to each differently."

Even though he has been a full-time crew chief for seven years, Foster is quick to point out he still learns from veterans on the staff. Younger officials reach out to Foster, asking his opinion on plays they clip, rules questions and how to respond to coaches in game situations. "There are different ways of sharing information and helping to solve problems," he said.

Crew chief Ed Malloy also sees the program as a great idea, formalizing information sharing and lessons in a way that used to be more informal. "In the past, there was no game plan for once you became a crew chief," he said. "We had the manual to read, and would pick the brains of our crew chief, and had conversations in the locker room or restaurant afterward."

"The Leadership Development Program has us sharing more information through conference calls. We're able to get more ideas that way. It's a great thing because the younger guys need to be ready to step into leadership roles," Malloy added.

"The program has made leadership a focus. Before we picked things up on the floor and plucked ideas from others. Now it's a focal point," NBA crew chief James Capers said.

Capers added that the program includes more detailed instructions so there is "a mind-set on preparing your crew, accepting responsibility and getting better. We have more discussions and that leads to greater effectiveness."

The training session also included voluntary webcasts that explored a number of different leadership topics, including 1) communication styles, 2) "why should anyone be led by you?" and 3) the truth about leadership.

"People don't follow a title, they follow courage," Delaney explained, attributing the line to Braveheart.

"You don't need to have problems to focus on improvement."

– Marc Davis

a master of arts in leadership from St. Mary's College in California.

The hardest step, the one requiring introspection and deeper thought (and by corollary, the one step often missed in leadership programs) is the need for reflection — taking time away from games to think about what happened.

"We're not a reflective society," he said. Reflection requires many things like learning, processing and determining how something impacts you in your personal or professional life, according to Delaney. "We must first lead ourselves, find out what we're good at, and what we need to improve. That's the backdrop for our program."

Leadership Styles

The panel discussion covered leadership styles. "I asked the panel questions on situations — what worked and what didn't — and we

"Officials have to have the courage to withstand pressure on the floor, exercise self-discipline and police themselves. It's tough to have those conversations with your partners."

Delaney cited the difficulties of digging in and providing tough feedback without being overly critical, "but we have to figure these things out before we go into the locker room."

The official's style in dealing with tough discussions often depends on his experience.

Takeaways

Crew chiefs have taken away many different positives from the program so far. Salvatore, as the senior referee on his staff, said he must remember not to "get too comfortable, don't get stale. I'm constantly learning to handle different circumstances. Reflection is a big part of that."

For example, Salvatore said he saw definite changes last season. He shakes up his morning meetings to eliminate repetition and "tries to be more creative to prepare our crew for the game in an impactful way. Every day is a learning experience and I want to pass that onto our staff."

Davis said the difference between good and elite officiating is being better at the basics, and the program has refocused his attention on that area. "You have to go back to the 101 class, not the 401 or 201 class," he said.

In conversations with his crews, Davis said he shares what he was thinking on the court as he and his crew watch video.

"I let them know what was going on in my head," he said. "I've learned the keys and cues to set the environment for my partners to verbalize better.

"Pregames can become routine," Davis admitted. By opening up the discussion, everyone looks out for the team first, and service first. "It's contagious to the whole organization. We get greater buy-in and a greater sense of accomplishment."

Foster said one of his goals is to help make everyone on his team look good. "The team goals are ahead of

the individual goals," he said. "Elevating the young guy who may be struggling means our team effort goes up."

NBA officials have always experienced a lot of training, the introduction of new techniques and feedback, including watching plays on video. What's different, according to Foster, is "we're sitting down together, watching entire tapes, and ask each other what they were they thinking in specific situations. We're working to understand the inner psyche and voice of our partners."

He said the video sessions "help me ask questions and try new things. It's self-talk. We learn what spots to go to look for certain calls. It ensures uniformity of mechanics."

Foster also pointed out how team camaraderie shouldn't be overlooked and is a by-product of the program. He cited as an example a game where he came out quickly from a tough situation and made a crazy signal. "The guys were just busting my chops on that and we were all laughing," he said.

But Foster explained there is an additional learning lesson beyond confidence bred from a comfortable team environment. He explained that his signal, while just a reaction, was picked up by other officials, which served as warning to always be vigilant as leader, because others are always watching and can emulate in good and bad ways.

Malloy says he is working on making his crew feel all equal. "We're the third team on the floor. When we know we're all in it together, we work our best," he said. "I want that feeling on our crew."

Recognizing that anyone on the crew may have to put on the "chief's hat" at any given moment, Malloy related a learning experience while working a game with



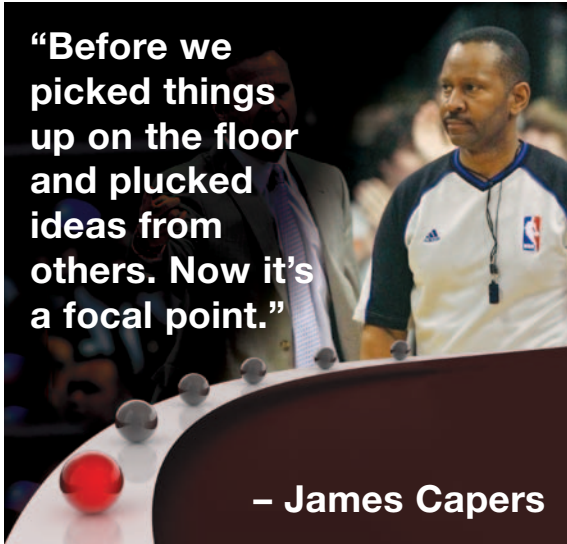
"We're the third team on the floor. When we know we're all in it together, we work our best."

– Ed Malloy

Steve Javie (now retired): "Steve would let you work through some situations. You might have to deal with something at the table and he would observe from a distance, let you figure it out, and come over to help only if needed or if you were going to make a mistake. I want to help our crew grow that way."

Capers said he has taken a more detailed approach in his pregame. Before the program, "we looked more at mechanics. Now we look more at plays and rules. We're collectively on a better page, every day, every game.

"We didn't have that type of consistency before because we didn't focus on leadership," Capers said.



"Before we picked things up on the floor and plucked ideas from others. Now it's a focal point."

– James Capers

Impacts at the NBA and Beyond

NBA crew chiefs feel that the leadership program has had a positive impact at the individual and team level. "While we haven't measured the program statistically, we've seen growth in the development of officials," Delaney explained. "The idea of all this is to provide an opportunity for discussion and learning. The true answer is three to five years down the road. What we're doing is not totally different. We're being more

proactive, more formal, and all voices are being heard. We're providing an environment for conversation and the leadership process."

When it comes to applying the model to other sports officiating or levels (college or high school, for example), Delaney said that while the rules are different; the interactions are similar. "Leadership applies across the board," he said. He has worked with numerous organizations, including NFL referees, U.S. Soccer, US Lacrosse and U.S. Polo Association, even the Florida State football team.



for our coaches and staff. We really learned from Bob's presentation, his stories and his continuous quotes throughout the season."

The conversations, "resonate across the sports spectrum because it's about managing the game, interactions with coaches and players, and making our officiating teams the best they can be. Any time you put things on the table that are important, it applies to all levels, including high school and college," Delaney said.

Salvatore agreed. "Leadership affects everyone every day of their lives. You're either leading or being affected by a leader, it doesn't matter if you are an administrator, teacher fireman or you work in the corporate world," he said.

"The officiating community has to understand that all levels of games are important to those participating. Leadership is about listening, communicating and cutting through the chatter. You need to know what others are saying," Davis said.

Foster would like to see a great leadership culture established at all levels. "It's viable to be done everywhere," he explained.

Foster also agreed the lessons are universal from the leadership program, and used high school basketball boards as an example. "Each board has a different culture. One could be a culture of indifference, another of education, another of 'where's my check?' The leadership for each comes from the top. We need people at the high school level to assume a stronger leadership role to breed a good culture in every organization," Foster said.

He cited a quote from former NBA official Ed T. Rush, who used the phrase "lead from behind." According to Foster, "it's about finding ways to help lead" regardless of where they stand in the pecking order.

"Everyone can take a leadership role," Foster said. "You can see a

pecking order at the college level in D-I, D-II and D-III, where some officials aren't comfortable dealing with a coach." With stronger leadership, he explained, it won't just be the veteran officials making those critical calls, but all officials, regardless of level.

Capers also agreed the program would benefit any sport at any level, but addressed his comments to basketball. "Some older officials don't have a mind-set of what it takes to lead a crew," he said. "We need to see them taking more of an interest in leading their team.

"That will make the younger referees who are coming up much, much better. The positive influence on officiating basketball would go through the roof."

Reflection

In the hectic world of an NBA official, time for reflection can be a commodity. Delaney looked at that need to step back from a busy schedule, and set aside time to think about the past game, or trends or specific situations that can serve as learning experiences for others.

"You can't do this (officiate basketball at the highest levels) well, if you're always running to your next game. You need time to reflect. There is no growth without reflection."

Working reflection into the leadership agenda has been one of the biggest challenges for Delaney. He acknowledged the program is trying to create an environment where Experiences + Intellectual Readiness + Reflection = Development, but that extra time is necessary for reflection.

"Twenty years from now, we'll look back on this as the infant stages. We don't need to go from zero to one hundred in a year. We can do it in increments and be successful," Delaney said. "Ongoing learning is imperative. There's a feeling in sports officiating that if you've arrived, you don't need to do more. The game has evolved, so officiating must evolve with it."

Dave Simon is a former high school and small college basketball official from Grapevine, Texas. □