
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Leading Marines—or Athletes

Jeff Barnett finds similarities between being an officer in the U.S. Marines and being a leader at a CrossFit affiliate.

By Jeff Barnett

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Courtesy of Jeff Barnett/CrossFit Impulse

In my life before becoming a co-owner and trainer at CrossFit Impulse, I was an officer in the United States Marine Corps. The role of the junior military officer is that of small-unit leader. The proverbial quarterback in the huddle, he is responsible for devising a plan, communicating its execution and supervising it to completion. Not surprisingly, I have found many similarities between military small-unit leadership and conducting group classes at my affiliate.

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An effective trainer plans the workout, communicates his intent to his athletes, supervises the conduct of the workout and solves unexpected problems. Just like the junior officer, a trainer will lead athletes of immensely varying levels of skill and experience. A lieutenant or captain must effectively utilize and earn the trust of both fresh recruits with little training and senior enlisted personnel with experience far surpassing his own. Similarly, trainers must provide a rewarding and effective experience for both rank novices with little CrossFit experience as well as the quintessential firebreather. I'm not about to suggest you run your classes like a platoon, but I do contend that many leadership techniques are just as applicable to putting 16 athletes through Jackie as they are to constructing a fortified defensive position.

**Will you run all athletes through the WOD at once?
Should you use multiple heats or start some athletes on a delay?
What are your equipment bottlenecks?**

Plan

First, create a plan. Examine the workout, your time limitations, your equipment limitations, the expected class load and any other factors relevant to your box. Prepare some scaling and substitution options in advance. The entire planning process to coach a WOD may only require 10-20 seconds. However, with the right combination of factors you could have some difficult options to think through, and planning might require several minutes.

Will you run all athletes through the WOD at once? Should you use multiple heats or start some athletes on a delay? What are your equipment bottlenecks? How long is the WOD? Do you risk running into the beginning of the next class' time slot? If so, do you need to implement a cut-off time? The variables are endless. Ensure you've considered all the relevant factors before class starts. If not,

then sometimes you can wing it and no one will be the wiser, but if you make a habit of winging it, your lack of preparation will eventually show. Planning doesn't have to be a rigorous 12-step process complete with a detailed timeline, but you do need to perform the mental exercise of planning for every class, even if that process is short and sweet.



Courtesy of Jeff Barnett/CrossFit Impulse

Proper class planning will allow you to give each and every athlete a great workout.

Take Charge

Next, be in charge. As the trainer, you are the leader. Regardless of your level of experience, the experience of those attending your class or any feelings of inadequacy you may have—you are the leader. Embrace this idea and start leading.

Most clients are attracted to CrossFit because they are looking for structure and leadership, so give them that structure. Don't be afraid to politely and professionally stand up in front of everyone, use a loud and clear voice to address the group, and explain your plan for the class. Additionally, explain things more fully than you think is necessary, even at the risk of being redundant.

Courtesy of Jeff Barnett/CrossFit Impulse



Equipment bottlenecks are sure to arise at some point, but clever coaches can work around them.

You should definitely make judgment calls about the level of discussion based upon each class and the athletes who comprise it. If newcomers are present, make sure you address their common questions, even if the firebreathers have to listen to the definition of a full-depth squat for the 90th time. This isn't always wasted time for them. You'll likely be surprised at the new tidbits of information your most experienced clients will pick up.

When preparing your athletes for the WOD, don't be afraid to direct them to move around, form groups, stand at their pull-up bar, stand at their barbell, etc. in order to facilitate your planning. The time you ask them to spend will be returned when the WOD runs smoothly because you took the time to ask.

For example, before the WOD at CrossFit Impulse we often ask our class members to go to the pull-up station and stand in front of the bars they plan to use. This means no bars will be "double booked" during the WOD, and everyone determines where to go and what to expect before the clock starts.

Conversely, you also don't want to spend group time on issues acutely specific to a single athlete. Only spend group time communicating information beneficial to

everyone in the group. Field questions that are only applicable to individual athletes but address them separately after you've released the group.

**Assist, advise, supervise
and correct—
but don't babysit.**

Another related issue is when an individual client needs an inordinate amount of attention. First, you should be willing and eager to help individual athletes. That's the core of what we do as trainers. However, you also shouldn't ignore your most experienced clients due to spending too much time with a single client. If an athlete needs a refresher on movement points of performance, by all means help them out and get them moving safely and correctly. However, get them to the 80 percent solution and then keep going.

You also shouldn't get caught trying to supervise the exact load your clients will use for the workout. Give athletes some advice and then let them find what they think is suitable. Check them out again before the WOD begins and ensure they made a sound choice. If not, adjust from there. Assist, advise, supervise and correct—but don't babysit. Athletes will employ whatever level of self-reliance you expect of them.

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Ask for Questions the Right Way

The way you open the floor for questions can determine whether clients will speak up. This is especially true for new or timid athletes. While we can wish that CrossFit will instantly transform everyone into a confident and outspoken athlete, the reality is that some athletes will not ask questions in a public forum unless prodded the right way. They will either leave their questions unanswered or approach you individually. You have a vested interest in fielding questions in a group setting, because the answers are heard by all athletes in the class, which benefits everyone.

The advice from above still applies: you don't want to spend group time addressing athlete-specific questions. If an athlete hits you with something that doesn't apply to anyone else, ask to field the question after the group breaks. But if the question is general in nature, you want to get it on the floor for everyone's benefit.

Unfortunately, what I consider one of the worst ways to ask for questions is also the most popular: "Are there any questions?" This statement subtly implies that a question is an irregularity. It implies that all should be clear, and it may even be construed to mean that any question has arisen from the athlete not fully listening or comprehending. This is sure to drive a timid client to stay silent. A better way to ask for questions is to phrase your request in a way that implies having a question is natural and expected. Two

phrases I use often are "Who has questions?" and "What questions do you have?" These phrases imply that I know questions exist and I am simply trying to discover them.



Courtesy of Jeff Barnett/CrossFit Impulse

During a WOD, trainers should work to spend time with each individual client.

Another subtle but somewhat obvious factor is how quickly you move on after asking for questions. Athletes can tell if you are hurried or just asking for questions as a dogmatic routine. After you ask for questions, give plenty of pause for athletes to speak up. Look slowly around the room, briefly making eye contact with each athlete. This will further entice them to come forward with questions. All of these techniques are important because, make no mistake, you will be answering those questions. The only variable is how many athletes get to hear the answers and how many times you'll answer the same question privately from different athletes.



A good trainer understands athletic movement and can communicate that knowledge clearly.



Even firebreathers can use a refresher, so it never hurts to reiterate the points of performance for any movement.



Speaking loudly and clearly is the mark of a good leader.

Time Management

My opinions on time management are largely personal preference, but I wholeheartedly think they are the best way to conduct business: start class on time, every time. By “on time,” I mean “when the big hand crosses the 12.” Not a second sooner. Not a second later. If you’ve set a deadline for people to arrive to class, then you owe them every minute before that deadline, so don’t start early and shortchange them.

**You owe it to yourself
and your clients
to start on time. Period.**

However, if you allow class to start late in order to wait on stragglers, you are slapping the face of every client who cared enough to show up on time. Furthermore, you are reinforcing the expectation that tardiness is acceptable. If you reinforce that it’s OK for athletes to arrive five minutes late every day because you wait on them to start class, then they have no incentive to arrive on time. You owe it to yourself and your clients to start on time. Period.

Next, in conducting your class, set timelines and stick to them. This applies to more than just running the WOD—the warm-up, WOD set-up, cool-down or any other regimented time at your box. If athletes are told they have 20 minutes to complete the warm-up or set-up for Fran, they will fill all 20 minutes. If the same athletes are told they have eight minutes, they will finish their tasks in eight minutes. Athletes will fill whatever time budget you give them, so keep them on track.

You can also manage class time during untimed WODs by using a running clock. For example, when we do CrossFit Total we take our athletes through the normal pre-WOD discussion and warm-up and then generally start the WOD with about 45 minutes left in the class. I start the clock and tell the class they should spend no more than 15 minutes on each of the three movements. Many of them don’t need the full 15 minutes, but those who do can keep themselves



Courtesy of Jeff Barnett/CrossFit Impulse

Good leaders are usually creative people who can find new ways to stimulate athletes.

on track. At each 15-minute interval, I announce that athletes should be transitioning to their second or third movement. Of course, I don't force them to drop the bar and immediately move on, but this allows them to work at their own pace while still keeping a schedule.

This is a relatively minor issue, but if left unaddressed you will inevitably reach five minutes remaining in class and one or two athletes are just beginning to deadlift. The running clock is also useful in untimed WODs for allowing athletes to more accurately gauge their rest intervals. Just as many athletes are unaware of their body positioning during a squat, many are somewhat unaware of how quickly time passes. A running clock gives them instant and continuous feedback.

Decisiveness

Sometimes the nature of CrossFit requires improvisation. Perhaps you programmed a 5K run and now golf-ball-sized hail is raining from the heavens. Maybe the WOD prescribes a back squat as part of an AMRAP but you don't have enough racks to put all your athletes through within your time allotment. Maybe the WOD is Linda and your affiliate isn't located at Rogue's barbell-production facility.

When unexpected scenarios require on-the-fly changes, be prepared to make a decision and forge ahead. If the situation doesn't require an instant decision and you need some time to consider the problem and make the best decision, then take that time. Put your athletes to work on something constructive and take a couple of minutes to solve the problem. Don't be afraid to be creative or to scrap the original plan entirely. What matters is that you're doing constantly varied functional movements at high intensity, not that you're precisely following any prescription to the letter.

Ask for input from your athletes if the problem lends itself to that approach. Asking for input is a great way to foster a sense of camaraderie and caring. However, you also have to be willing to politely explain, "I appreciate the input, but I don't think that's the best solution." Glean all the information possible and then make your own decision.

Once you've made a decision, stick to it. Your changes will undoubtedly be met with at least some consternation. You'll most likely be moving the WOD outside of someone's strengths or possibly directly attacking someone's weaknesses. Some athletes will view this as an

opportunity, while some may complain. Stick to your guns. You may be bombarded with plausible ways to make someone's desired scenario work out for everyone. Unless you discover new information that significantly changes the decision-making process, don't reverse course. Only change your decision if you are presented with facts that show your decision is clearly inferior to an alternate decision. If the two courses of action are similar in results or only mildly different, then stick with your original decision.

**Don't be a stubborn
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Leaders aren't bullied into flippantly changing decisions. If you show that you're vulnerable to this, you'll allow the same circus every time you have to make a decision. Furthermore, the decisions you make will be seen as less competent and authoritative. If you'll change your decisions on a whim just because someone disagrees, you must not consider your decision-making ability very adept. This could gradually and subconsciously erode your clients' confidence in you. In short, don't be a stubborn blowhard who refuses to acknowledge a superior solution, but don't be a pushover either.

Extraordinary Situations

All affiliate owners will eventually experience some type of demanding leadership scenario. This could be in the form of a belligerent client, an injured client, a client who is consistently delinquent on payment or even altercations with non-clients when the WOD takes you outside your box. We've been very fortunate at my affiliate and have only experienced the most minor altercations.

The strangest leadership scenario I ever faced was in Iraq in 2006 when my assistant team leader approached me and said, "Sir, are you aware an exorcism occurred while you were southeast of Fallujah?" The alleged exorcism caused some friction within the team and required a measured

but decisive approach. I dealt with the odd situation and its effects on my team in the same way I deal with all extraordinary situations.

- First, stay calm, collected and objective. Nothing can be gained from losing your cool.
- Assess the urgency of the scenario. Is action required immediately to avert something negative? How quickly is a response required from you? These answers will determine the timeline of your next steps, which could range from milliseconds to weeks.
- Gather information. This could be watching an event unfold with your own eyes, asking a client how he or she feels, researching city ordinances, or any activity aimed at educating you on the situation you must handle.
- Evaluate possible courses of action and the most likely outcomes, and consider their second- and third-order effects.
- Make a decision and implement it. If applicable, deliver your decision with empathy for the affected parties but not with emotion.
- Evaluate repercussions, feedback and actual outcomes. Modify the decision if necessary.

Keeping calm is important for two reasons: First, you will make better decisions. Second, clients and other bystanders will often base their feelings and reactions on the reaction of the leader. React calmly and they will perceive the situation isn't a big deal. Get angry, frustrated or loud and they'll perceive the situation as the ugly scene you're making it. Perception is reality, and you are in a unique position to control perception with your own actions.

Praise in Public, Reprimand in Private

Positive reinforcement is one of your most powerful tools as an affiliate owner and trainer. When an athlete shows progress or achieves a milestone, give a public pat on the back, whether that be literal or figurative. At CrossFit Impulse we use the comments section of our website each day to mention those who made special accomplishments or who just worked their asses off. We also show our admiration for those accomplishments by sometimes using a picture of that athlete on our WOD page for the next day.

When the unfortunate scenario arises where you must talk to an athlete about an unpleasant topic, do it in private. You'll be free to have the conversation you need to have without the threat of eavesdropping, and the client will respect you for respecting his privacy.

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No Favorites

It's both unavoidable and healthy that you will eventually befriend some of your clients. Not everyone's personality will mesh with your own, but many will. However, when you're coaching you must be a professional and avoid any favoritism for individual athletes. I don't suggest using a watch to control the time you spend with each client, but the bottom line is that when others need your coaching, you shouldn't keep spending time with the same client just because you are friends. All your clients are paying for your attention, and they all deserve it equally.

Implementing this in my own coaching had an interesting side effect. My wife and the other co-owner of my affiliate often participate in WODs while I am coaching. After a few months of running classes I realized that during WODs I was actually ignoring both of them to a fault in order to not show favoritism. However, they need coaching and encouragement during WODs just like me and all our clients.



Courtesy of Jeff Barnett/CrossFit Impulse

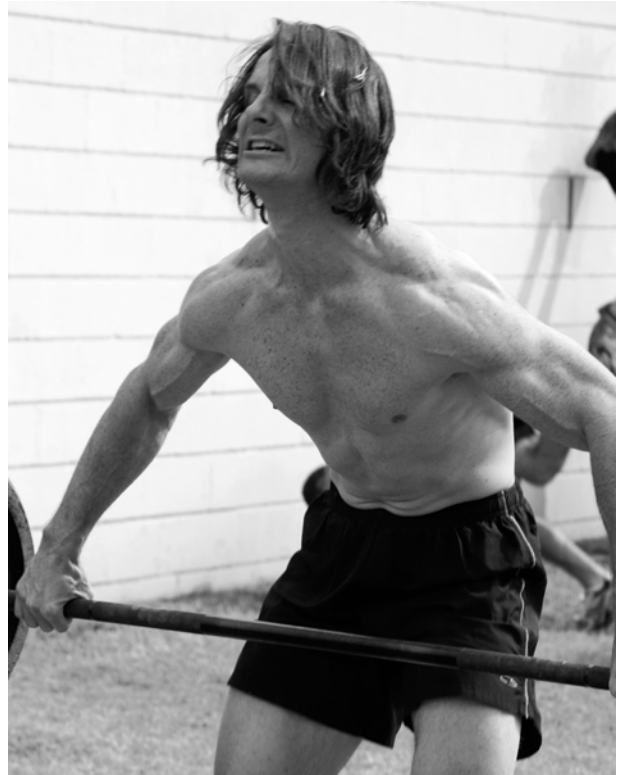
Jeff Barnett doesn't lead Marines anymore, but he's using the skills he learned in the Corps to create better athletes.

Find Your Own Style

Leadership is both science and art. No canned solution will work for every situation. Your personal leadership style also plays a large part in determining which methods you choose to employ. I have no doubt that all the methods I've presented do not apply to everyone's leadership style. I also have no doubt that I could improve on my own leadership methods and learn from other leaders. There are no right or wrong answers, just methods that achieve results and those that don't. Just like the clock during a WOD, as leaders we are all measured by the same objective measuring stick: results.



Courtesy of Jeff Barnett/CrossFit Impulse



Leslie-Ann Barr

About the Author

Jeff Barnett is a mechanical engineer and co-owner of *CrossFit Impulse* in Madison, Ala. He served as a United States Marine officer from 2003 to 2007, including combat duty in Fallujah, Iraq. He has been a guest op-ed columnist for the **New York Times** on their *Frontlines* and *Homefire* columns. He placed sixth in the Alabama Sectional and 51st in the Southeast Regional. When he's not training clients or training himself, you might find him wakeboarding, eating meat off the bone or finishing an MBA at the University of Alabama Huntsville.