

Coaching Urban Gymnastics in Chicago's Extreme Conditions

Robert Harris
University of Phoenix

Jesse White is the longest-serving and also the first African American to hold the position of Illinois Secretary of State. As a state elected official and gymnastics coach, White represents two distinct yet overlapping entities which will be outlined in this paper.

Under White's leadership and influence, the Secretary of State's office has become one of largest in the nation, providing more direct services to the people of Illinois than any other public agency. White's office issues state ID cards, auto-license plates and titles; registers corporations; enforces the Illinois Securities Act; and administers the Organ Donor Program. Additionally, Secretary White oversees the State Library and promotes literacy programs popular among K-12 and community colleges.

Despite Chicago's extremely violent reputation, White has spent 56 years working as a volunteer with the Jesse White Tumbling team, a program started in 1959 that offers a safe haven and positive environment for inner-city kids. The goal of the Tumblers is to help kids stay away from gangs, drugs, and to help at-risk youth commit to successful pathways in life. As a transformational-servant leader, White inspires and motivates others by providing meaning and challenge to their work or activity. Since the Tumblers programs began, more than 16,000 young men and women have performed with the team worldwide. Moreover, these young men and women will openly testify to White's influence, motivation, and individual attention.

According to organization theory, there are four primary behaviors that constitute transformational leadership (Gregory Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004):

- (1) Idealized influence
- (2) Inspirational motivation
- (3) Intellectual stimulation
- (4) Individualized consideration

Jesse White exemplifies these four leadership traits in his roles as both a volunteer coach and an elected public official.

Robert Greenleaf is credited as the author of the servant leadership concept by modern organizational theorists. Servant leadership, exemplified by Jesse White, focuses on serving others rather than upon serving the self and also on understanding the role of the leader as a servant (Greenleaf, 2002). Self-interest should not motivate servant leadership, rather, it should ascend to a higher plane of motivation. Servant leaders develop people by helping others to strive, excel and flourish.

The leader inspires followers to see the attractive future state, while communicating expectations and demonstrating a commitment to goals and a shared vision (Bass & Avolio, 1993).

The Early Days

Since 1959, Jesse White, former baseball and basketball college athlete has dedicated his life to excellence in public service and community development. White graduated from Alabama State University during the early days of the civil rights movement. From 1959 to 1966, White was a member of the Chicago Cubs AAA baseball farm system where he finished with a lifetime .291 batting average. He made it close to the major leagues but never got that coveted call.

White accepted his military draft responsibilities serving as a paratrooper in the United States Army's 101st Airborne Division, was a member of the Illinois National Guard, and held several political offices including Recorder of Deeds of Cook County. White also worked as a teacher and administrator for Chicago Public Schools for 33 years before being elected Secretary of State in 1998.

Jesse White Gymnastic Tumblers

As the Secretary of State for Illinois, Jesse White is equally known throughout the state of Illinois as the coach and founder of the Jesse White Tumblers. According to White, as told to the *Chicago Defender*:

I was working as a physical education teacher for the Chicago Park District on the West Side when one day my supervisor asked me to put together a one-time only gym show so I did. So I started teaching kids how to tumble and after the kids performed parents and park officials urged me to keep putting on shows. Becoming a Jesse White Tumbler is not an easy task. After trying out for the team ... those accepted must go through nine months of training before officially becoming a team member. And not everyone makes it through training, which is very intense. (Hutson, 2010).

The Tumblers are coached and mentored by White and 5 additional coaches. During each new season typically 900 youth tryout for the team but less than 450 are accepted. Several months later, additional eliminations occur during the training process. Approximately 50 to 60 tumbling students graduate from the training process each year. Selected Tumblers are required to practice 3 to 7 hours

a week and are often paid for their individual performances. According to White:

If we do a paid event, I take those funds and equally distribute it to the team members that performed. When I first started the tumbling team students were not paid and they participated solely for the love of the sport. But now I see that sometimes, not all the times, a motivating factor to be a tumbler is compensation and recognition.

White explained that with the economy being so tight many Tumblers, who come from low-income households, see their participation as their paid job:

I try to help them out as much as I can because I do not want them to be tempted to get money some other way. A lot of these kids come from fatherless and motherless homes so I am more than just their coach but for some their parent, mentor and friend. (Hutson, 2010)

The team has designated locations around the city where tryouts, training, tutoring, and practices are held, based on where a student lives. The more than 16,000 young men and women aged roughly 5 to 25, who have performed with the Tumblers come from some of the city's most unforgiving areas. "Everything that I do is in some way affected by what the team instilled in me," said Richard Blackmon Jr., 37, a former attorney and current Director of Training at a welfare-to-work program. Blackmon Jr. first made the tumbling team as a 5-year-old living in Cabrini-Green. "It was about so much more than just tumbling. It was about service and how you carried yourself as a young man," Blackmon Jr. said (Osno, 1999).

Academics

In addition to tumbling, the organization also provides free tutoring and has given over \$300,000 dollars in collegiate funding over the past 14 years. Tutoring participation is mandated for those who fall below a C average in a semester. Students are still allowed to practice while they work to improve their grades but cannot perform until they bring their average up to a C or better. Each year about 8 to 10 students do not qualify academically to perform. But that does not deter White from his primary aim, which is to help at-risk youth navigate a path to success.

Another component to the tumbling team is its scholarship program. Established in 2000, the program provides academic and financial support for current and former members who plan to continue their education beyond high school. Among these, the program also offers admission and financial aid counseling and arranging college visits. Currently, there are 51 members enrolled in college, medical, and law school.

Extreme Challenges

Predicting extremely successful performances is of great interest to athletes and coaches (Hackman & Wageman, 2005). Those who train consistently well are also likely to compete well. But performance in training is not a perfect predictor of

performance in competition; a person who trains well can do poorly in competition. These events are usually attributed to the athlete's arousal level being too high because of effects of audience and/or fear of evaluation.

Over the years, there have been extreme challenges internal and external. According to a Miami University study done in 2005, all gymnasts are most fearful of injuries due to the difficulty in returning from an injury and being unable to participate in practices and competitions while injured. Most gymnasts described external aspects of their past performance experience, such as consistency and communication with significant others, as important sources of self-efficacy maintenance.

With or without training, external accidents are unfortunately, unavoidable. Due to high elevation and the aerial performance associated with this sport, the chances of injury can be high, and it can be extremely dangerous. The rigorous expectations for perfection by the most highly trained gymnastic tumbler can result in accidents if either the timing or placement of such exertions is not perfect. Thus, these are extreme athletic gambles.

On July 4, 2008, something went extremely wrong for one of the Jesse White Tumblers. Jarvis Williams, a senior in high school, had successfully completed his routine 50 or more times before. However, on that particular day, he turned his flips as he usually did but over-rotated just before landing, coming down on the back of his neck after soaring about 10 feet off the ground. An unfortunate accident and valiant attempt at perfection, his Tumbler days were over in that instant. He sustained a spinal cord injury and would never walk again.

Aside from the dangers of actually performing as a Tumbler, violence is also a very real factor in Chicago. Many members of the Jesse White Tumblers endure extreme sacrifices to travel to and from practice and are often close to gang-heavy areas. In September 2014, 16-year-old Devonshay Lofton was shot to death on the Northside Chicago walking down the sidewalk with friends. Jesse White described Devonshay Lofton as a responsible team member in good standings for over 5 years. This event was devastating to the tumbling team. However, thanks to the efforts of coaches, staff, parents and community stakeholders, Devonshay Lofton's death will hopefully not be a recurring event and helped to bring additional awareness to unwarranted gun violence in Chicago. In another context, it is another extreme example of the self-efficacy and coaching efficacy exhibited by this team and staff to overcome tragedy.

Self-Efficacy Theory

Persuasive techniques are widely used by coaches, managers, parents, and peers in attempting to influence an athlete's self-perceptions of efficacy. These techniques include verbal persuasion, evaluative feedback, expectations by others, self-talk, positive imagery, and other cognitive strategies. Self-efficacy beliefs based on persuasive sources are also likely to be weaker than those based on one's accomplishments, according to the theory (Feltz & Lirgg, 2001) (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy as defined by Christina Lee from the University of Adelaide, refers to the belief that a person can perform a particular activity in a particular

setting. Given adequate skills and incentives for the task, one's efficacy for that task determines the amount of effort expended, the degree of persistence, and the final result (Feltz & Lirgg, 2001).

Gymnastic performance is influenced by cognitive and emotional skills in addition to physical skills. Some athletes demonstrate greater mental toughness or perceptions of efficacy than others in the mental aspects of performance. The construct of self-efficacy has been of great interest to sports researchers and coaches (Vargas-Tonsing, Myers, & Feltz, 2004). In sport, the terms self-confidence and self-efficacy have been used to describe a person's perceived capability to accomplish a certain level of performance. An individual's efficacy beliefs can be influenced by four principal sources of information: performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences (or modeling), forms of verbal persuasion (e.g., feedback from coaches), and physiological states (Bandura, 1977, 1997). Performance accomplishments have been shown to be the most influential source of information in sport situations (Feltz et al., 1999). As Bandura (1997) posits, athletic efficacy involves control of disruptive thinking or distractions and affective states as well as physical performance. Perhaps the Jesse White Tumblers use practice and performance as an escape from the world outside the gymnasium or the negative influence of their neighborhoods (Bandura, 1997). Moreover, Gould et al. (1999) found that successful Olympic performance required extensive planning and flexibility to deal with numerous unexpected events and distraction. The parallels are clear and distinctive, yet also closely matched.

Extreme Conditioning Yields Global Attention

The Jesse White Tumblers program has received international praise. The team has traveled to Zagreb (Croatia), Tokyo, Beijing, Hong Kong for the Chinese New Year, Canada, and the Cayman Islands and have been featured in 4 movies and 25 commercials. They have performed at Half Time for every NBA team with the exception of the Oklahoma City Thunder and the Charlotte Hornets. They have also appeared in 2 presidential inaugural parades for President Clinton and President Obama. This year, the tumbling team will have more than 1,500 performances using 7 different units, consisting of 325 young men and women. In 2014, the Chicago Park District opened the Jesse White Community Center and Field House in honor of White's lifelong ability to transform lives and serve the community: Transformational-Servant Leadership.

References

- Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84(2), 191.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. London: Macmillan.
- Bass, B. M., & Avolio, B. J. (1993). Transformational leadership: A response to critiques. In M. Chemers & R. Ayman (Eds.), *Leadership theory and research: Perspectives and directions* (pp. 49–80). New York: Academic Press.

- Feltz, D. L., Chase, M. A., Moritz, S. E., & Sullivan, P. J. (1999). A conceptual model of coaching efficacy: Preliminary investigation and instrument development. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 91*(4), 765.
- Feltz, D. L., & Lirgg, C. D. (2001). Self-efficacy beliefs of athletes, teams, and coaches. *Handbook of Sport Psychology, 2*, 340-361.
- Gould, D., Guinan, D., Greenleaf, C., & Chung, Y. (2002). A survey of US Olympic coaches: Variables perceived to have influenced athlete performances and coach effectiveness. *The Sport Psychologist, 16*(3), 229-250.
- Greenleaf, R. K. (2002). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Gregory Stone, A., Russell, R. F., & Patterson, K. (2004). Transformational versus servant leadership: A difference in leader focus. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 25*(4), 349-361.
- Hackman, J. R., & Wageman, R. (2005). A theory of team coaching. *Academy of Management Review, 30*(2), 269-287.
- Hutson, W. (2010). The Jesse White Tumblers celebrate 50 high-flying years. *Chicago Defender*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/246910431?accountid=458>
- Osnos, E. (1999). Tumblers help keep kids from taking fall; Jesse White troupe has grown from a small-time activity for cabrini-green kids to big entertainment. *Chicago Tribune*. Retrieved from http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1999-06-23/news/9906230116_1_cabrini-young-man-gymnastics
- Vargas-Tonsing, T. M., Myers, N. D., & Feltz, D. L. (2004). Coaches' and athletes' perceptions of efficacy-enhancing techniques. *Sport Psychologist, 18*(4), 397-414.