

Developing a Positive Culture in a Sports Program

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Abstract

Many programs desire the ability to build each year and have success. Developing a positive culture will bring in the athletes desired, push them to new levels, and have them fighting for each other and the program. It is readily evident which programs have this culture when observing them at sporting events. They are the teams where the energy is always high, the reactions are positive, and they appear to be having fun! This all starts with positive team culture. Take pride in developing this, and the pride within the program will grow just as much.

Can the culture of a program truly make or break the experience for those involved? Is passion for the sport enough to override a toxic environment? The culture of a program is one of the main determining factors of an athletes' enjoyment and experience of the program. The culture often times will determine the success of the program and is essentially valuable (Taylor, 2016).

Toxic cultures take away the enjoyment of the game and the possibility for athletes to develop a passion for the sport (Strauss, 2020). The responsibility of creating a positive culture does not rely solely on the coach, although the majority of the responsibility rests on them. Administration, parents, and the athletes themselves also have a role in the culture of the program. How to set up that positive culture can be done in many ways, but the main components are fairly straightforward.

Identify the Problems

In any program, there are bound to be problems. How to respond to those problems is what may make or break the program. Having a knee-jerk reaction often time creates more issues and unnecessary

problems. Taking a calm approach to the problem and understanding how to fix it is pivotal in eliminating any future issues. There are times where it is important to make a quick decision, but if the program needs to grow, looking at how decisions affect the future based on your mission statement and philosophy will impact the program. It is a wise practice to look at the program from the eyes of another coach. If a new coach were to come into the program, what might be something they would identify as a problem? They may just point out something that was not noticed before.

Developing Goals and Creating a Mission Statement

A carefully crafted mission statement, coaching philosophy, and team philosophy are instrumental in creating a positive culture in any program (Gilbert, 2017). The coaching philosophy is the foundation of a program (Guthrie, 2003). Athletes who know exactly what is expected from all angles are more likely to succeed and help foster the positive culture sought by coaches. While drafting a coaching philosophy, Guthrie suggests the following core principles: be yourself, define your coaching objectives, establish rules, build and nurture relationships with athletes, be organized, involve your assistant coaches, help athletes manage their goals, help athletes manage their stress, and focus on the big picture (Guthrie).

Common areas to think about while creating goals are to look at how the team stands realistically in the district, what personnel the team is going to consist of, and what will create the most buy-in among the athletes. Communicating these goals among the staff helps the coaching staff be on one page, all believing in the same mission. They will have their own individual philosophies, but being able to believe in the head coach's mission is important. Using a common practice of creating SMART goals can clarify ideas, focus efforts, use of time and resources productively, and increase the chances of achieving what you want in life (Mind Tools, n.d.).

Once these actions have been achieved, the athletes will need to hear the mission and understand the main points behind it. This gives them a clearer picture of who they are being coached by and when certain things come up in the year, they have some assurance that they will not be bombarded with a surprise statement from their coach.

After the mission statement is addressed, it is time to talk about the goals. These goals should NOT be made without input from the eventual captains/seniors. These athletes have been on the battlefield the longest, and should have a major role in creating and forming the goal. When they have created the goals, a sense of pride and determination takes hold as they want to implement the goals they created. Ownership and leadership will soon follow, leading to the team more likely working together. The coach acts as a facilitator to guide the goal setting process, but ultimately the athletes are the ones who should decide on goals.

There are many different options in how the finished goals can be released to the team. The coaching staff can lay out the goals, delivering statements about the importance and meaning behind each goal. The captains/seniors deliver the message about the goals. This again will give them an opportunity for immediate leadership among the team. When younger athletes see veteran leadership is on the same page, the odds of them following suit are much higher.

There is also the ability for the coaching staff and the veteran leadership to both detail the goals. This shows that it is not just a coach-led team or athlete-led team; but rather a team effort among those in the highest positions of leadership. This team effort will create a powerful culture that will trickle down among the new athletes in the program. Their desire to be a part of the system will most certainly increase and culture will take hold.

Unite the Staff

A large component in any athletics program is the coaching staff. Piecing together the right combination is valuable no matter the sport. The most effective staffs consist of those who follow the same passion and mission as the head coach. Meeting with fellow coaches and discussing the type of culture for the team is a proactive way to develop a healthy team culture (Taylor, 2016). This does not just happen by accident. The head coach is responsible for sharing that vision with his or her staff. This can be accomplished through staff meetings, staff activities, or even so far as training the staff. Having a book study among the staff is another way of sharing a vision. Having an open trust within the staff is pivotal for a staff to be united and on the same page. Any staff member should feel

comfortable coming forward with a concern or question about the program. There are often things overlooked by the head coach that are picked up on by the other staff. These concerns should never be kept silenced for fear of backlash from the head coach.

When a staff is united, sharing a common vision and purpose for the team, the athletes will surely benefit. It is often underestimated how much the athletes notice in regards to the coach's relationships with each other. When a staff is respectful and friendly with each other and the athletes know and see this, a culture is created where it feels almost like a family environment.

In today's culture, the home structure has changed so much leading to many athletes seeking the type of environment described above. Nearly half of all marriages end in divorce or separation (Divorce Statistics, n.d.). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 19.7 million children, more than 1 in 4, live without a father in the home (Fatherhood, n.d.). For many athletes, the athletic and team space may be the safest and most peaceful place for them.

Consult with the Athletes

Having a voice is a large part of building a positive culture in a sports program. The athletes are the ones on the front line throughout the sports season. They take the direction from coaches, apply it to the best of their ability, and repeat the cycle. While there needs to be a level of hierarchy and responsibility on the part of the coaches, consulting with athletes can bring forth issues or problems that a coach may be unaware of.

Coaches should welcome feedback from their athletes (Hoffman, 2018). The locker room can be a breeding ground for negativity towards a program, and any issue being brought to the attention of the coach can address the negativity. Outlining to an athlete that they are valued and that their opinion matters will go a long way in building the relationships necessary for a positive culture to exist. These do not need to be done with the entire team. Regular check-ins with the team captains or veteran leadership would suffice. It has been said that too many voices in the huddle will often create more difficulty than help.

In a structured program with an established positive culture, the captains and veteran leadership will be able to gauge where the team is at and adequately express any concerns that need to be brought to the coach. This method of check in can also be done via electronic means. There are multiple online survey options, Google documents, and website applications that can be utilized to conduct a survey. Examples would include programs such as Remind and Hudl, or survey sites such as Survey Monkey and SoGoSurvey.

Look to Other Programs for Success and Seek Counsel from Other Coaches

The willingness to learn from other programs and coaches is the sign of a mature program that places athletes first. There are model programs at all levels of sports that demonstrate what a positive culture can do for a program. Many of these model programs, at least at the collegiate and professional level, have some form of informational text describing what they do in their program to create this positive culture. There is no need to reinvent the wheel when it comes to developing a positive culture. There are other programs that have similar ideals and ideas which are being shown through their actions.

Taking part in coaching conventions or athletic conventions is a great opportunity to visit with other coaches about what they are doing in their programs that is leading to such success. In a large number of these programs, it may not be so much about the X's and O's as it is about the relationships and culture of the program. If there is something that is desired at a program, asking the other coach in a professional manner is acceptable. Looking to modify a program with positive components of another program is beneficial for all parties involved.

“It’s for the Kids” Mentality

The number of titles won, the years coaching, or the accolades a person has achieved should never be the forefront of a program. The athletes should always be first and foremost in every program. While determining the correct approach to the season, every question should revolve in some aspect around the athletes. This is the athlete-centered approach that leads to a positive culture.

As the coaching staff is solidified, thinking about which coaches work best with particular student-athletes in your program generally yields the best programs. It is not necessarily the coach who has the most technical knowledge of the sport; after all, they could know everything possible about the sport, but if they are unable to work well with youth, the benefit to the program might not be so great.

Any work that is done in a program should have the end question of, “How will this benefit the athletes in this program?” If there is no benefit, is it the right thing to do? Is it necessary to implement? While there may be moments a coach would prefer not to have, if it will benefit the athletes in the program, putting aside personal feelings and emotions is needed in order for the growth to occur.

Plan for Implementation

Once all of the pieces of a positive culture are understood and developed, it is critical that they are implemented into the program. Implementation is necessary as a “talk-only” culture yields limited results. Action yields results. Throwing the entire basket of cultural changes into the program at one time is ill-advised. If a structure has been in place for any extended period of time, there will be adjustments made on behalf of the athletes and the coaches. This will take time to develop, leading to a slower introduction to the components of the program. Laying this progression out in an implementation plan will help the process. Knowing the program goals allows one to determine what is most crucial to implement immediately, followed by a logical sequence of component introductions.

Follow-Up and Reflect at End of the Season

As the season comes to a close, there is still plenty of work to be done (Gilbert, 2017). Aside from the mundane tasks of checking in uniforms and end of year paperwork, reflection and following up with the athletes is a final piece of culture building. Sending out a year-end survey is a quick way to ask the team about their thoughts on the season. This is another moment where an athlete can feel valued and know that their opinion matters.

The end of year banquet is another opportunity to recognize the accomplishments of both individuals and the team as a whole. Both recognitions need to happen so that every athlete in the program feels successful and that they had accomplished something in the season. Whether or not awards are distributed is at the discretion of a coach. Many times this turns into a popularity contest, but teams with a high level of positive culture will look at the survey and year end award voting with a different lens.

Finally, it comes down to the coach and their staff to reflect on the season. Asking simple questions of what worked, what did not work, what needs to be improved, and what can be of better focus next season are all program building questions. It is essential to reflect on the season, and if positive team culture was a focus of the season, the answer to these questions will give the information needed to understand if the program achieved the desired culture.

Conclusion

Was my program successful in terms of having a positive culture? Did my athletes enjoy the time in this sports season? If you have built a positive culture in your program, the answer to these questions will be yes. While the components listed in this paper certainly do not contain everything needed to foster a positive culture, they are bulk areas that will be more easily implemented and lead to immediate notice of

culture changes in a program. If a sports program has been largely unsuccessful and seems to have a large turnover of athletes, the culture may be the main culprit. Every athlete deserves the enjoyment of a positive culture. Provide that for them, and the program will soar to new heights.

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