

Build a Positive and High-Performing Sports Team Culture

Some sports are ready-made for a discussion about the influence of team culture on individual and team performance. Team sports, such as basketball, football, and soccer, require that time and energy be devoted to building a culture that will lead to success. Without this discussion, the chances of a team being successful are small. Individual sports, however, often don't give much attention to team culture despite the fact that most individual sports are built around a team structure, for example, track and field, ski racing, and tennis. The fact is that, for individual sports, the influence that individual athletes can have on a team, whether healthy or toxic, is just as important as in true team sports. Nor do we often think about how an individual sports team can have a significant effect on the performances of its individual members.

Yet, have you ever been on a "downer" team? I'm talking about one that is permeated with negativity, unhealthy competition, and conflict. It sure doesn't feel good and it can definitely interfere with your performing your best. Whether you are an athlete on a team or one of its coaches, you can have a big impact on how your team gets along, functions, and performs.

In addition to my psychology work with athletes, I consult extensively in the corporate world where I help executives and companies to maximize individual and team performance. One of the most important areas I focus on in this work involves helping senior management to create an organizational culture that is positive and high performing. While working with the coaching staffs of several junior sports programs, it occurred to me that developing a healthy team culture is as important in the sports world as it is in the corporate world. So, in applying these concepts to sports programs, let's start with an understanding of what a team culture is and why it is of essential value.

A culture is the expression of a team's values, attitudes, and beliefs about sports and competition. It determines whether, for example, the team's focus is on fun, mastery, or winning or whether it promotes individual accomplishment or team success. The culture is grounded in an identified sense of mission and shared goals, for instance, the goal of qualifying for a regional championships or winning a state title. Individual sports teams are complicated a bit by the fact that they aren't really team sports. Unlike true team sports such as basketball or football, the success of one athlete isn't dependent on how his or her teammates perform. Yet, I'm sure that you would agree that the culture of a team, whether healthy or unhealthy, has a real impact on its individual athletes. For example, a team that is in constant conflict or has a negative atmosphere will bring team members, athletes and coaches alike, down and this unpleasant atmosphere will also hurt individual athletes' performances. Conversely, a team culture built on positive energy, support, and fun will lift everyone up, feel comfortable and supportive, and the results will show it.

The culture creates norms of acceptable behavior on a team, either explicitly or implicitly conveying to members what is allowed and what is not. These norms can dictate to team members how to behave,

communicate, cooperate, and deal with conflict. When clear norms are established, everyone on a team is more likely to abide by them. Very importantly, the culture creates the atmosphere that permeates every aspect of a team's experience. Is the atmosphere relaxed or intense? Light-hearted or competitive? Supportive or competitive? All of these qualities of a culture have real implications for how the team functions, how its members get along, and, crucially, how the athletes on the team perform and the results they get. When a team has a defined culture that is understood by all of its members, they feel an implicit pressure (in the good sense) to support that culture.

How a Team Culture Develops

Coaches can allow the culture of their team to develop in one of two ways. First, it can emerge naturally as an expression of its individual members. The benefits to this "organic" approach is that team members feel a sense of ownership for the culture because they created it. But there is a risk that the creation of the team be unfairly shaped by one or a few team members who may be particularly assertive or controlling, leaving other members of the team feeling marginalized and powerless. And a real danger can arise when the team culture is hijacked by a small subset of the team who are more interested in exerting their own power over the team, however unhealthy it might be. The result can be a truly toxic culture that serves neither the best interests of the team as a whole or its individual members.

The second approach, and the one that I recommend, is for coaches to take an active (though not dominating) role in the creation of a team culture. Through your leadership and open discussions with team members, your team can identify the values, attitudes, and beliefs that you and your athletes want to act as the foundation of the team culture. You can also discuss what all of you feel is important in terms of the atmosphere you want to create, the expectations the team has about their behavior, and the way in which team members communicate. This collaborative approach to team culture will ensure that members feel a sense of ownership for the culture and, as a result, are more likely to live by its dictates.

Training Group Subcultures

In addition to the over-all culture that a coaching staff fosters to best serve the goals of the entire team and the needs of all of its athletes, training groups (e.g., based on age, ability, or specialty) or position groups (e.g., football lineman or receivers) within the larger team can also create their own cultures. These training-group cultures better reflect the individual personalities of their coaches and athletes and the unique goals that they are pursuing. These subcultures also allow athletes who may be unable to take a leadership role in the team as a whole to exert influence within their group.

Questions to Ask

- 1) What values do we want to act as the foundation for our team culture?
- 2) What attitudes and beliefs about your sport, competition, and team do you want to hold?
- 3) What are the goals that the team wants to pursue?
- 4) How do the athletes and coaches want to treat each other?
- 5) What kind of atmosphere do we want on your team?