



CONNECTICUT INTERSCHOLASTIC ATHLETIC CONFERENCE

CIAC COACHES UPDATE



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CHANGING A TEAM CULTURE

This month's topic deals with an issue that nearly every coach of a high school team has faced. How many times has a coach had a successful season, perhaps even a championship season, only to have negative forces ruin what should have been a positive experience? How many of our state's high school coaches have started the season with high hopes, only to see them dashed by factors that affected the chemistry of his/her team? The following article addresses several of the key ingredients in teams that fail to live up to expectations, and it provides some solid advice on creating a team atmosphere that will maximize the talent available. Although the article is somewhat lengthy, I believe that you will find it valuable to your coaching efforts.

Bob Lehr, Editor

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Changing a Team Culture: Championships are Founded in Program-Wide Trust

Larry Lauer, Ph D, Rob Smith

Within every team and program there is the opportunity for success and also for self-defeating breakdowns and total collapse.

Think about this statement for a moment. Is this true?

We would argue that it is. Any athletic program has the potential to be successful, even if you do not have much talent. At the same time, every program has a number of stakeholders with different interests. Student athletes want to play, win, be on a team with their friends, represent their school, and be recognized for their efforts. Coaches want to develop young people, win, compete, build a program and so forth. Parents want their children to be successful, have fun, and of course win, too. Administrators want successful programs with few problems that shed a positive light on the school.

All Programs have their Powder Kegs

There are many similar interests across these stakeholder groups. However, their primary interests often create conflict. What's the primary interest of the coach? It is his or her team. What is the primary interest of the athlete or parent? You hope the team, but maybe it's their own self-interest (playing time, points, or glory). Every program has powder kegs or people, situations, decisions that can blow up in your face if not handled wisely.

Frequently coaches complain about the issues they have with others in the program. Student-athletes are not willing to work hard and seem entitled. You can't push them to the extent you need to develop their abilities and have an outstanding program. And, when things are not going well they take home a message that deflects the blame from themselves to the coach. This creates drama, makes the kid feel important and gets the parents' attention. So, often parents hear the negative message massaged by the athlete to place themselves in a positive light.

Coaches are concerned that administrators feel the pressure to succumb to the politics of parents who are trying to get the coach to do what they want in the program. Sometimes parents create rumors about coaches, attempt to make changes in programs by exerting political power, and second guess coaches. The politics that surround teams makes it difficult to create team cohesion.

So, how do we overcome this inherent conflict of interest and get back to building great programs?

Championship Teams develop over time and with trust-building

In the 2008-2009 season the Pittsburgh Penguins were struggling to make the playoffs. They fired the coach, Michel Therrien, and hired Dan Bylsma from their American Hockey League club. The Pens went on to defeat the Red Wings in the Stanley Cup Final in seven games, and compiled an astonishing record of 34-11-4 (including playoffs) after Bylsma's hire. This is the rare minority, however, it does not usually work this way; change the coach and the team succeeds.

Bylsma was the second coach in NHL history to be hired midseason and win the Cup.

Why do quick turnarounds not happen very often? Think about when a new coach comes to a program, with a new philosophy and system, a new way of doing things, and with different expectations. For adolescents this is a lot of change to deal with especially when they don't have the life experiences and coping skills to always handle it well. We argue that high school programs should hire coaches for the long haul and then provide all the resources needed to build a program founded on trust amongst stakeholders. When you create a culture and a tradition where trust exists and communication is transparent, great things are possible.

Program-wide trust is the foundation of championship teams. Programs must facilitate coach-athlete-parent administrator trust and communication to succeed. Instead of coaches walking on egg shells afraid to make tough decisions because of parental reactions, offending players, and worrying if the administration will have their back; coaches must have the trust within the program to make tough decisions and have those around them follow. All program members must understand their role, accept it, and recognize how their current behavior/attitude is adding to or taking away from the solution. When Coach Smith's team lost the 2008 high school girls varsity basketball state championship game the winning coach remarked that a big part of the reason they won was because the parents were supportive and not creating drama and distraction.

To illustrate how to develop program-wide trust let's review the case of the East Lansing girls basketball team that won a state championship in 2010.

Trust is at the Core of Winning a State Championship

Winning and coaching are very complex things that are the result of thousands of hours, decisions, communications, and the efforts of many people. You will find it very difficult and really useless to attribute a championship season to one key move or decision. However, we do believe that every season has tipping points that influence the course of the season greatly.

Rewind back to early March of 2010. For the fourth consecutive year the East Lansing varsity girls basketball team is considered a real championship contender. In previous years the team suffered heart breaking losses, once in the championship game and once in the quarters to the team that would runaway with the state championship. What was even more frustrating was the fact that the team was

favored in each of these situations to win, and they even led in the 2009 state quarterfinal the whole game until the last minute. It was the coaching staff's opinion that the team failed not in being prepared, but in staying composed under pressure. We also felt that this could be directly linked back to the lack of trust between stakeholders in the program. When some parents are overtly second-guessing the coaches it is impossible for the athletes to buy-in to what the coaches are communicating.



Photo provided by Robert Smith

East Lansing was feeling the weight of the continued expectations as they headed in to the 2010 state playoffs with only one loss, and with few tight games during the conference schedule. Last year they were undefeated the whole season until they suffered defeat for the first and only time in the quarters. Would they experience another post season trip that would end with disappointment? The question, although no one was saying it aloud, was on everyone's mind. Playing with this kind of burden showed as the girls played tight offensively and struggled to find their rhythm in the district playoffs. Fortunately, the girls battled to a regional championship. However, the team was not dominating like in previous years. How could they even be as good as last year's team who didn't win states?

It was clear that something wasn't quite right with the team. They weren't executing on offense and were resisting the coaches' strategy to slow down the game when they had the lead late. They did not



Photo provided by Robert Smith

trust that it was the right thing to do. Team chemistry was great off the court, but on the court the players still did not totally trust the coaches' decisions. At a team meeting we talked about trust and belief to get the girls to buy into slowing the game down; it wasn't stalling, but being smart and forcing the other team to foul. In response a senior raised one of the best questions we have ever had to answer. "How can we trust that we are going to win a state championship when we had great teams in the past and we didn't?" This was question was at the core of the tense, burdened team. They were consumed about the outcome that they could not trust the process. This was a tipping point.

But, why should they not be consumed by the outcome, the state championship, which had been this team's mission for years? This was the time of the year that everyone had been waiting for. It was their time to shine; but the pressure of the spotlight was putting the girls in a nervous, doubting mindset. They had to believe in themselves and focus on the process. We probably did not get through this mindset in past years.

What could we do differently? The answers we gave that day may or may not have made anyone feel better, but the message was to take faith and trust in the process. Trust in the hard work and preparation they had put in all of their lives. Trust in the coaches and that they knew what was best based on their expertise and diligent scouting. Trust that if you focus on the "how to play" that the outcome would take care of itself. What other choice do you have? You can continue to choose to dwell on your concerns over winning and meeting everyone else's expectations.

This has not worked before; why go down the same path? Believe in yourselves, trust in your coaches and teammates, and take faith that by doing the right things on and off the court that you gave your self a chance to win it all. If not, then you won't have a chance.

The girls went on to play outstanding basketball in the state semifinal and championship games. They played with a confidence and composure we had not seen in previous years. It seemed as if they played without the burden of expectations and fear. How did the mindset and feel in the locker room change? The key was when the senior captains bought ownership of the process and sold it to the rest of the team. They decided to trust in the team, in the coaches and ignore the distractions. Winning a state championship happens when the players trust the coaching staff and the coaching staff trusts the players. Together we made it, and for everyone involved that should be the real reward.

How to Develop Program-Wide Trust

East Lansing is a great story about a team struggling with chemistry and trust within its program and then turning it around. In 2010 they experienced very few problems between stakeholders in the program. Importantly, parents were very supportive and backed the coaching staff, thus allowing the players to trust. Let's not forget a few important things though. The team was very talented and was led by three Division 1 bound players. Moreover, it was easy for players to buy into roles because the pecking order was clearly defined based on talent and experience. The team certainly benefitted from these factors. At the same time, there were a number of key things implemented to create program-wide trust which were essential to the championship season. These trust builders were implemented over a period of three years. Thus, success and trust did not happen overnight, but grew over the seasons.

1. Enhance Staff Credibility

If you have a trust issue, then the coaches must enhance their perceived credibility. Players and parents must know that they are competent and their interests are genuine. They are not there just to set themselves up for the next job. They truly care about the student-athletes and want the best for them as people and athletes. Caring can be expressed in many ways from a pat on the back, listening to a player when she is down, giving a player a chance based on practice efforts, showing passion for teaching all players on the roster, and creating a connection between coaches and players. The East Lansing coaches also demonstrated their credibility with an interest in continuing education. They went to coaching clinics, watched videos and read books.

2. Set and Clarify Program Expectations

Everyone must understand their roles and the responsibilities that come with them. Coaches need to get on the same page with administration; what are the objectives we need to fulfill? It is also important for coaches to build trust with the parents, and educate them about appropriate conduct. This is crucial since the parents have the ability to reinforce or break down the level of trust fostered within a team, or between the athletes and the coaching staff. Furthermore, coaches must establish clear lines of communication. Trust is destroyed when parents jump the chain of command and go to the principal or superintendent to voice complaints. Attempt to transparently handle all concerns at the coach-athlete or coach-parent-athlete level.



To aid in the process of clarifying program expectations, the East Lansing coaching staff developed a "How We Operate" document that established codes of conduct for coaches, parents, and players that were reviewed in the orientation meeting.

3. Establish a Culture and a Mission

One of the best ways to motivate youth is to give them some power. Let them help the staff develop a mission for the season. Where do we want to go and what do we need to do everyday to get there? Things like doing well in the classroom, treating teammates with respect, etc., will be voiced as players talk about the daily things it takes to be a champion. You don't become a champion in a day, it takes months and even years of doing the right things and this includes off the court. This will facilitate the establishment of a positive culture. In East Lansing's case we established a high performance culture. Playing time is based on practice and game performance, not on who you are or the past. Not everyone will play all the time, or get the number of shots they want, but you will play a valued role that contributes to the team's success. Team comes first in our decisions – "We before Me". Finally, you have to be willing to be pushed hard, take some criticism (remember always more positives than negatives when communicating with youth), and accept that making mistakes may cause you to be removed from the game (but with dignity and effort to teach instead of punishing).

The coaches exhibited their belief in empowering the girls by allowing them to sometimes pick the drills in practice or even relying on them for what plays or defenses to run during games. The team also set their "10 goals for victory" and led their own warm-ups. Finally, the coaches reached out to the leadership on the team by setting up a Leadership Council. The team was represented by three upperclassmen that would go talk to coach in a respectful manner about team issues. And, the coaches had to listen and attempt to not get defensive when they heard things they did not like. The coaching staff promised their girls they would listen to them, but they could not always do everything that was requested.

4. Continue to Clarify Roles and Establish Team Chemistry

In our situation we had many new faces. In some ways this made it easier, because the pecking order was pretty clear. However, it also made it difficult because the veterans had to make the new girls on the team feel like they belonged. Having team dinners, camps, and meetings with team building activities helped to establish this chemistry. They created a family feeling; the girls wanted each other to be successful. This process is reinforced when the coaches clearly establish roles and help players see how their role is valuable and contributes to everyone's success. To show how everyone contributes the coaching staff would ask players to write their name on a note card. Their teammates would then write down things that the person was doing that was helping the team be successful. They would also write down what they thought the person could improve upon. We have also done this exercise publically with players openly addressing teammates and the contributions that they are making. Finally, to continue the process of trust-building the coaches asked players during the season what the stakeholders (coaches, the player herself, teammates, and parents) could do to help the team be successful.

5. Foster Mental Toughness and Discipline

To be a champion requires mental and physical toughness. You have to be willing to do the training in order to be great. To challenge the girls to go to the next level we had them think about their self-limiting beliefs and counter them. They had to overcome their personal demons as well as the team's demons; this battle continued into the playoffs. At the tipping point the girls decided to trust in each other, in the coaches and in the process. If you don't believe deep down that you can make it, whether it be due to own personal doubts or those created by program stakeholders, than you will never reach your goal. That is why getting parent support is paramount to success.

They cannot be undermining the coaches. It only creates a lack of belief and trust. In contrast, supportive parents can boost the confidence and cement the trust.

For our team we were able to have a motto that connected to a popular song. Our motto was "together we will make it." And, fortunately the song "Together we made it" became a huge inspirational piece during the playoffs. It allowed us to refresh the message after a long, grueling season. We inserted this new motto during the playoffs and it really brought the girls closer together and inspired them to push beyond their doubts and trust that they had what it took. If you can create a team motto that has a very meaningful message then you can bond a team and get them to go where they have not before.

Ultimately, trust can only occur if the team has done the necessary hard work. If you don't have the conditioning how can you trust that your team can last in a playoff tournament? Further more, you have to be willing to prepare mentally for the pressure by creating strategies that you have planned out and practiced for the big moments. In East Lansing's case girls were taught deep breathing, visualization, and positive thinking strategies that were integrated into routines that helped them plan for, and overcome, adversity.

Confidence can be a tricky thing for a teenager. Teenage girls tend to be hard on themselves and worried what others think. So, the coaches implemented strategies to continually help the girls feel like they were improving. They created challenging practices that really pushed girls to go beyond their limits and be successful. The coaches also celebrated each girls' strengths, used video and press clippings to highlight accomplishments, and sat with girls 1-on-1 to discuss areas to improve and encourage them to persist.

6. Communicate Always

The coaching staff has prioritized the importance of transparent communication. We let the team and the program know why we are doing things. They may not always agree, but we gain their acceptance because they know where we are coming from. Further, communication is not a one-way street. Coaches must listen and lead by example. They must ask for feedback and make players and parents feel they are approachable and want the input. Again, set the expectations early on how to do this appropriately. For example, we had the team list three things that the coaches could do to help them personally and/or the team. We then discussed them with each player. By doing this we showed an interest in every player and helped them meet their needs.

As mentioned earlier, if you give the players some power then they will be more engaged in the process. They will take ownership for team functioning. This is especially true when it comes to your team leaders. You must openly communicate with them, listen to their advice, and really work with them to lead in effective ways. We gave them the MHSAA captains booklet as a way to help them learn how to better lead.

In addition, within your coaching staff it is helpful to have coaches that play different roles. In our coaching staff, the head coach has to make the tough decisions that make people unhappy. Gary Greider, a very experienced and respected coach, serves as the guy the girls could talk to without any ramifications. They could say whatever needed to be said to Coach Greider. The girls appreciated having this outlet. You cannot underestimate the importance of having coaches on your staff with different skills and roles. The head coach cannot be everything to everyone. Therefore, it is essential that the head coach empowers his or her coaching staff to communicate with players in the program and follow through on the principles of building trust.

7. Handle Conflict Quickly and Wisely

Again, every program has powder kegs. Commit to preventing crisis and dealing with festering issues. Avoiding conflict only allows things to get worse behind the scenes, and it certainly breaks down program trust. Make it clear that players should feel comfortable coming to you with concerns. Then, when they do respectfully approach you with critical feedback avoid becoming defensive or biting their head off/punishing them for communicating something you may not want to hear. If you reinforce open communication then your problem-solving and trust can be strengthened. Educate your team on the best ways to approach the coach and also learn how each player handles feedback. Help them develop a thicker skin while facilitating respectful communication throughout the team.

Conclusion

Developing program-wide trust is a difficult thing and can be a long process. You should not expect turnarounds in the first or second month or possibly even the first or second season. Instead, be patient and work diligently to develop the foundation of trust. Communicate transparently with all stakeholders in your program. Create a structure and a culture that facilitates trust and minimizes selfishness and politics. Be true to your philosophy, make it clear what your vision is and how everyone can play a role to get there, empower your athletes to take ownership of team functioning, and inspire them daily to follow through.

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45 CLOCK HOUR COACHING PERMIT COURSES

FALL POWER CLASS held at

CIAC Office, 30 Realty Drive, Cheshire, CT
Thursdays and Fridays October ,20,21, 27, 28, 2011 -5-10pm
and Saturdays October 22 & 29, 2011 - 8:30am-9pm

FALL SATELLITE POWER CLASS 1 held at

Amity Regional High School, 25 Newtown Rd. Woodbridge, CT
Thursdays and Fridays October 13,14,20,21, 2011 -5-10pm
and Saturdays October 15 & 22, 2011 - 8:30am-9pm

FALL SATELLITE POWER CLASS 2 held at

Norwich Free Academy, 305 Broadway Norwich, CT
Thursdays and Fridays October 27, 28, November 3,4, 2011 -5-10pm
and Saturdays October 29 & 5, 2011 - 8:30am-9pm

WINTER TRADITIONAL FORMAT CLASS held at

CIAC Office, 30 Realty Drive, Cheshire, CT
Every Wednesday Night from 6:30-10pm
Beginning November 30, 2011 until February 29, 2012
(Class is not held on traditional school vacation weeks)

EARLY SPRING 2012 POWER CLASS held at

CIAC Office, 30 Realty Drive, Cheshire, CT
Thursdays and Fridays March 1 & 2, 8 & 9, 2012 -5-10pm
and Saturdays March 3 & 10 - 8:30am-9pm

SPRING 2012 SATELLITE POWER CLASS held at

Conard High School, 110 Beechwood Road, West Hartford, CT 06107
Thursdays and Fridays May 10 & 11, 17 & 18, 2012 -5-10pm
and Saturdays May 12 & 19 - 8:30am-9pm

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NO WALK IN REGISTRATIONS

Thursday November 17, 2011 - 6-9 PM

MODULE 8 - Strength & Conditioning Design

Friday November 18, 2011 - 6-9 PM

MODULE 4 - Legal Aspects

Saturday November 19, 2011 8:30-11:30 AM

MODULE 10 - Gender Equity & Diversity

Saturday November 19, 2011 Noon-3 PM

MODULE 5 - CIAC Rules & Regulations

Saturday November 19, 2011 , 3:15 - 6:15PM

MODULE 12 - All Adult Construct of Coaching

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