Published on Sports Management Resources

Communication Rules for A Respectful Workplace

Note: The following material is excerpted from a pre-publication manuscript: Lopiano, D.A. and Zotos, C. (Publication 2014) The Athletic Director's Desk Reference. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Developing a respectful athletics department environment is an essential predicate for conducting a model athletics program. Yet, few athletics departments have policies on respectful communication behavior. The following material represents a suggested educational resource or policy governing expectations for workplace communications. Most important, it contains basic information on behaviors that exemplify courteous interaction and specific information on the steps employees are expected to take to resolve conflicts.

COMMUNICATION RULES FOR A RESPECTFUL WORKPLACE

This educational resource is being distributed to all employees as a reminder of good professional practice when dealing with others. We are only as good as we make each other! I hope you find this information helpful.

1. Organization Values

All communication should reflect our commonly accepted athletics department values:
- Commitment to the achievement of organizational objectives
- Pursuit of excellence in the performance of work duties
- Integrity and transparency
- Team work
- Professionalism
- Respect

2. Suggestions for Respectful Professional Atmosphere and Conduct

- Begin any meeting with a professional greeting
    - Greeting by first name: "Good day John"

- Look directly at the person and smile
- Handshake or other appropriate professional contact in greeting
- “Thank you for taking the time to meet with me”

- Never interrupt someone when they are speaking – allow them to finish what they are saying.

- Ask permission to take notes to make sure you don’t forget anything. “Do you mind if I take notes so I don’t forget our decisions or what each of us agrees to do?”

- Ask how much time the person has for the meeting so you can make sure to respect his/her time.

- State your “agenda” at the beginning of the meeting, “I would like to cover three topics: (1) assignment of coaches, (2) plans for community activities, and (3) transportation.”

- Even if you have authority to tell someone to do something, ALWAYS ASK as a courtesy – never use your authority to demand that something be done unless it is absolutely necessary.

- Even if you ask someone to do something, extend the courtesy of discussion. “Would you be able to get John and Mary to meet with Coach Smith to discuss the basketball team’s alumni association appearance?” “Is this acceptable or are there better people to work on this project?” or “Do you agree that this is the best course of action?”

- If either person in the meeting agrees to do a task, that person should offer a time when the task will be completed and ask the other person if the timing is satisfactory. If the person taking on the task does not offer a deadline, the other person should ask, “By when do you think you could accomplish this assignment?”

- If the time of the meeting ends without the completion of an agenda, ask the next good time to meet and schedule that time. “There are still some items we didn’t complete. Can we schedule a meeting for tomorrow or another convenient time for both of us?”

- At the end of the meeting, state how you will follow up on the conversation. “I will send you an email to summarize our discussion. Please be sure to let me know if I’ve missed or misunderstood anything.”

- The person who asked for the meeting is always the person who should follow up the meeting with a summary of agreements.

3. Respectful Disagreement

It is always acceptable to say, “I respectfully disagree. Would you mind if we discuss other alternatives?” or “Would it be okay for us to discuss an alternative?”

4. Professional Obligation to Help Another Employee Recognize or Prevent an Error.

• Silence when you see that a mistake is about to be made, one that you could have prevented, is being a party to the error. Each employee is professionally obligated to ensure that the organization doesn't make a mistake.

• The vast majority of errors are unintentional. No one wants to make a mistake. If you see that another employee is about to make a mistake, you should ask to talk to that employee privately if possible. "Do you have a minute for a short conversation?" and then ask permission to offer an opinion, "Would you mind if I offered a respectful opinion about XXXX that you are free to consider or disregard? I care about this situation and just want to make sure you are aware of XXXX."

• Even if the employee is someone you supervise, this approach is necessary. If you are trying to teach someone you supervise, you might begin with, "I care about your professional development, would you mind if…."

• If you are in a meeting and a decision is about to be made that you don't think is correct, you are professionally obligated to raise your concern. "May I please state my concerns about this decision? I don't think this is a good idea because….."

5. Expressing Comments or Concerns About Other Employees

o It is appropriate for supervisors to openly discuss the professional strengths and weaknesses of employees.

o It is not appropriate for one employee to complain about the performance or behavior of another employee to a third party without first trying to communicate with the employee with whom he or she has a problem or disagreement.

o It is appropriate to express concern to your supervisor about another employee's performance or behavior and ask for advice on how to deal with the situation.

6. Conflict Resolution Guidelines.

o Do not attempt to solve a problem when either party is emotionally upset (i.e., shouting, standing and talking loudly, not listening, not letting the other person have a chance to speak.) Logical and rational behavior is almost impossible in the face of such emotion. If this is the situation, respond with, "We can't solve this in an emotional atmosphere or when we're not listening to each other. I'll talk to you tomorrow about a time when we can get together alone and discuss this."

o Timing and Privacy. Ask the employee you have the problem with to agree to a time to talk in private...away from other employees. This meeting should take place as close as possible to the occurrence. No employee should complain to another employee's supervisor before attempting to resolve the situation himself or herself, one-on-one, by talking directly to the person with whom you have a difficulty.

o Demeanor and Conversation Tone. During the one-on-one meeting, both parties should be sitting and voices should remain at a normal speaking level. There is to be no yelling or use of inappropriate

language. Both parties should be as committed to listening as to talking. Each party should try to look at the problem from the other person's perspective in addition to the perspective of his or her own self interest. Follow these sequential steps:

a) The person wishing to express a concern or complaint should be very forthright. "This is what I perceive happened yesterday...do you think this is accurate? (be very specific--do not talk in generalities)."

b) The person with whom you have the concern should be permitted to verify the accuracy of your description of the problem…or to present their view.

c) The person expressing the concern should continue by explaining: "I do not think that what happened is appropriate because...(give reasons)." Be sure to determine whether the situation is already covered by organization policy. “Do you think this is reasonable for me to express this?”

d) The person with whom you have the concern should be permitted to give their view on the validity of your perceptions.

e) The person expressing the concern should continue by explaining: "This is how I think this situation should be resolved...(present solutions for discussion)." “Do you think there is another way to resolve this?

f) The person with whom you have the concern should express their view on any additional possibilities re: solutions.

g) Both parties should attempt to come to an agreement on how the situation should be resolved.

• No Resolution – Next Step is Mediation. If resolution of the problem was not possible during the one-on-one meeting between the two employees, both employees should go to their respective supervisor(s) and ask that both supervisors mediate the resolution of the problem. Follow these steps sequentially:

i) The supervisor (or both supervisors in the case of two employees with different supervisors) should sit down in a private meeting with both employees at the same time.

ii) Steps a) through g) above should be repeated by the employees and both parties should be given an opportunity to explain why no resolution was possible.

iii) If the matter is clearly covered by organization policy, the supervisors should point out that organization policy prevails and that both employees must adhere to that policy.

iv) If the matter is not covered by organization policy, the supervisors should suggest additional options for resolution or express a preference for already discussed options, giving his or her reasons for this preference. Both employees should be given the opportunity to come to an agreement on how the situation should be resolved, given the supervisor's suggestions.

v) If there is still no mutually agreed upon resolution, the supervisor(s) may (1) make a decision and inform both employees they must abide by that decision

7. Conflicts with Parents or Others Outside the Organization.

• The employee should always use his or her best judgment to take action to protect the safety of student-athletes, other employees or program participants, if possible asking security to intervene. An employee should never put himself or herself in a position of danger.

• If no one is in danger and you are confronting an angry person, explain that you are required to observe certain policies and if that person doesn't agree, offer to give him or her the name and phone number of your supervisor. "I'm sorry that you are upset, but I am required to follow this policy. I would be happy to give you the name and number of my supervisor so you can talk to him/her directly and I promise to report your concern to my supervisor. Do you have a card so I can have my supervisor call you? "

• Your supervisor should be immediately informed of such conflicts. If possible, try to determine the identity of the dissatisfied person.

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