Published on Sports Management Resources

Transforming a Culture of Physical Abuse to One of Respect

The macho, tough-it-out culture of highly competitive sport encourages athletes to endure physical pain or abusive levels of exertion in silence. It is also common for competitive sport environments to breed an expectation of student-athlete obedience to the demands of coaches, even if such demands are unreasonable. Student-athlete acknowledgement of physical distress is often interpreted by teammates and coaches as a sign of weakness, generating peer pressure to maintain silence and play through injury and potentially dangerous levels of fatigue. Often, misguided notions of team loyalty require silence to protect a teammate or coach who has committed a major or minor transgression. Many athletics programs utilize volunteers with no professional training in teaching or coaching who operate under Knute Rockne like notions of coaching behavior. Finally, because the athletics department is often physically separated from the general operations of the institution, there little exposure of higher administrators or non-athletics personnel to the daily work or program environment. At many institutions, external stakeholders are so enamored with the public importance of athletics, the fame of players or coaches and the inordinate interest of donors and citizens in the program that officials, from higher administration to campus policy, becomes complicit it keeping silent about misconduct. These are the factors that tilled the fertile soil that resulted in the Penn State/Sandusky debacle and could similarly affect many athletics programs.

Creating a culture of respect begins with the athletics director's commitment to establishing this as a primary goal. This goal may be directly or indirectly expressed in the program's strategic plan. For example, following are several goal statements that indirectly express a respectful culture:

- Enhance the intellectual, personal and leadership growth of each athlete.
- Achieve conference success in all sports and be recognized for athletics program integrity

However, more direct statements may be advisable to reverse the counterculture currently in place:

- Create school spirit and alumni and public pride in an athletics program that demonstrates respect for others and coach/student-athlete personal responsibility
- Demonstrate respectful behavior and a commitment to personal responsibility by all staff and student-athletes

Measurable objectives tracked by data collection or surveys that support such goals might be as follows:

- Sustain a level of integrity and respectful behavior that no student athlete or coach becomes ineligible or suspended from play for a violation of rules or conduct.
- Demonstrate coach/student athlete knowledge of all forms of prohibited or professional misconduct and how to report such concerns without fear of retaliation

Once the strategic plan commitment has been made, the second step is a detailed expression of policy that addresses staff and student-athlete responsibilities in this area. Such policies should address both behaviors that are prohibited by law such as sexual harassment and abuse and professional inappropriate behaviors that are prohibited by institutional or athletics program policy. In particular, the athletics program needs to address instructional areas where crossing the line between appropriate and inappropriate conduct most often occurs: physical punishment, emotional and verbal abuse, physical bodily contact, equal treatment based on gender, assigning responsibility for team success/failure, romantic/dating/social relationships between coaches/supervisors and subordinates/students, use of peer/captain pressure, social isolation and team initiation rituals.

Sample policies may be accessed by clicking on the following links:

- Sample Policy: Ethical and Professional Conduct of Athletic Department Employees
- Sample Policy: Hazing, Initiation Rituals, Sexual Harassment, Bullying and Physical Punishment
- Model Policy: Diversity and Non-Discrimination
- Operating Principles for Athletics Organizations
- Sample Policy: Standard of Professional Coaching Conduct

The third step is a commitment to education and consistent and repeated expression of respect as the most important organizational value. It's not enough to have a written policy, the expectation of respectful conduct and respect for others must be repeatedly voiced by athletics department leadership: the athletics director, senior staff and head coaches. Either at an all-athlete meetings at the beginning of each year, or at the first team meeting each year, the athletics director, head coach and head athletics trainer should address the issue of the student-athlete's respect for his or her own body, expressing how important it is to report injuries, not ignore pain, understand the seriousness of concussions, and the feeling free to report physical distress. The student-athlete must hear his or her head coach say that it is not a sign of weakness or lack of commitment to listen to what the body is trying to tell us. Every athletics department leader must voice the importance of respectful behavior toward others, even opponents. Especially dealing with the issue of sexual harassment and abuse, consideration should be given to retaining an outside consultant to conduct a workshop on this issue and to be sure such workshop includes policy issues such as the use of physical punishment and verbal and emotional abuse.

The final step is policy enforcement. When violations of policy or disrespectful behaviors occur, there must be consequences. These consequences should be graduated in the case of minor violations (i.e., warning before a penalty) but may be major in the case of zero tolerance violations (i.e., sexual abuse, professional misconduct).

These materials are excerpts from a prepublication manuscript due to be published in 2014: Lopiano, D.A. and Zotos, C. *The Athletics Director's Desk Reference*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics. Sample

policies should not be used without careful review by the institution’s legal counsel.

Topics

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