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Q: Why is the "chain of command" so important?

Governance is the formal control of the operation of the athletics program through decision-making according to specified authorities. The athletics director is only one decision-maker in a chain of school district or institutional decision-makers. Decisions by these institutional or school district authorities are affected by external governmental and non-governmental decision-makers such as lawmakers (local, state and federal governments and their education agencies), accreditation agencies and athletics program governance organizations (conference, state, national).

Governance isn't just about rules compliance. Governance, or decision-making, is about every operational decision, from budgeting to hiring a new employee. It is about fairness; being consistent about the reasons for a decision from similar case to similar case. It is about being able to explain the reasons behind every decision so that people understand the reasoning process and always being open to such questioning. It is about being willing to reconsider a decision whenever a mistake has been made or new information is brought forward.

Keys to responsible governance are: (1) educating internal decision-makers who will be responsible for making sure the athletics program conforms to legal and athletics governance association rules, (2) ensuring that eligibility, admissions and other critical and ethical decisions related to student-athlete academic status are made independent of the athletics department and according to clearly documented procedures, (3) clear written policies holding athletics personnel (staff and student-athletes) accountable for following governance rules, (4) transparency – sharing all information with administrative superiors or those within the institution responsible for decision-making or oversight, (5) self-reporting of any discovered violations of rules and showing how systems have been established to prevent a repeat of the violation, and (6) always asking expert advisors before taking action if there is any question regarding the application of rules to specific situations or the political implications of a decision.

While the athletics director is expected to be the internal institutional expert on athletics program governance organization rules and, if applicable, athletics program certification conducted by those athletics governance associations, he/she is not expected to be a expert in local, state and federal laws and policies or to be responsible for the institutional accreditation process. Key to successful athletics program governance is identifying a team of internal and external experts who are always accessible to the athletics director for help with athletics program governance issues. This is particularly important in

the case of high school or small college athletics departments with small or non-existent athletics administrative staffs. If there is no Associate Athletic Director for Compliance or an Athletics Eligibility Officer, a probably overextended athletics director must depend on others to help with important compliance responsibilities. Never “go it alone.”! The stakes are too high to risk the reputation of the educational institution. Violation of athletics association rules, misbehavior of coaches or student-athletes, misuse of funds, a Title IX lawsuit or other transgressions are readily chronicled by the media. Remember, twenty-five percent of the local newspaper is devoted to sports coverage.

Understanding the “chain of command” is also important politically. There are numerous instances of donors, members of boards of trustees and others who try to exercise unofficial power to influence athletics program decisions. When individuals who are important to the institution ask the athletics director to take certain actions or make particular decisions, the athletics director must both inform and seek counsel of higher administrative officials in handling such situations. There are also formally constructed and appointed advisory groups, such as faculty dominated intercollegiate athletics councils, that have no official authority in decision-making but play critical political functions. Regular communication and consultation with such groups is important to the institution because these groups are often turned to for expressions of support for formal decision-making.

Last but not least, all decision-making involves a consideration of both the letter and spirit or intent of rules, laws and policies. Rules and laws simply cannot cover every specific situation. Thus, the athletics director will always have interpretive latitude. However, the consequences of bad decisions in a sports sensitive media environment are significant. Thus, the athletics director must hold himself/herself accountable to both the letter and spirit of rules, displaying a commitment to highest ethical standards and embracing a duty of care for the student-athletes being served as well as the institution’s and program’s reputation.

Suggested Governance Team. Athletics program governance is simply too complex for the athletics director to handle this function alone. A team of advisors should be formally assembled by invitation of the athletics director to perform the following critical functions upon request:

- Principal or President – Considered by most athletics governance organizations to be ultimately responsible for the conduct of the athletics program. In some institutions the athletics director may have a direct reporting relationship to the President or Principal.
- Direct Report Vice President (immediate supervisor of Athletics Director) – primarily to serve as political advisor, should be informed of any concern or when the athletics director is directly contacted by a member of the Board of Trustees, School Board, elected official or major donor
- Registrar – production/verification of eligibility reports, must be fully educated in athletics association regulations
- Human Resources Director – school district or university administrator, to help with all personnel issues, one of the most difficult areas for the athletics director
- Director of Admissions – for colleges/universities, decisions related to admission of all recruited student-athletes, must be fully educated in athletics association rules
- Legal Counsel – school district or university administrator, to help with all legal issues
- Title IX Compliance Coordinator – school district or university staff member required by law, to deal with Title IX/gender equity, pregnancy and sexual harassment issues
- Compliance Director – for colleges/universities, an assigned athletics department staff member
- Conference or League Compliance Officer

This group doesn't meet or act by committee. These are truly advisors who will be contacted based on specific fact situations. They should be pre-identified because there must be a concerted effort by the athletics director to educate each on athletics governance association rules requirements and in the case of eligibility, establish strict procedures and timetables for the production of required documents. There should also be relationships established with a member of the state (for high schools) and national (for colleges) athletics association rules staffs.

NOTE: The above content has been excerpted from:
Lopiano, D.A. and Zotos, C. (Publication 2014) The Athletics Director's Desk Reference. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

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