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[Q: What is the optimum number of senior staff in an athletics department?](#)

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Note: Following are excerpts from the prepublication manuscript. Do not distribute without citation. Lopiano, D.A. and Zotos, C. (Publication 2013) The Athletics Director's Handbook: A Comprehensive Practical Guide to the Management of Scholastic and Intercollegiate Athletics Programs. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

A: The number and roles of senior management is an important decision for the athletics director. Starting from the top, the athletics director has to decide which staff members should report directly to him or her. Of course, size of the organization will help dictate part of this decision. In a high school or small college, the athletics director may be the only person on staff with supervisory credentials. Coaches in these smaller athletics programs may hold second assignment titles as event managers, facility managers, physical education teachers, and the like, having responsibilities for the day-to-day operations of their area with no full-time staff supervision. However, the athletics director in a larger, more decentralized department with several associate and/or assistant athletics directors has the flexibility to make more strategic decisions regarding personnel management. Generally, a senior staff should be limited to five or six direct reports.

One approach to making decisions on who these senior managers should be is to analyze four separate conditions.

1. **Prioritize Athletics Director Responsibilities.** Compare the most important requirements of the athletics director's job against the need to supervise specific personnel. If external relationship building and fundraising are essential to the financial stability of the department, the athletics director may minimize the number of people who report directly to him or her so s/he can spend a significant amount of time off-campus meeting with donors, corporate sponsors, and the like.
2. **Power and Visibility of Employees.** Possibly a more important consideration is an analysis of the power and visibility of specific employees. There is no doubt that athletic departments are professional bureaucracies where much of the labor force (i.e., coaches) are experts in their area. Such experts can be resistant to administrative oversight and, for a select few, such as the head football or basketball coach, may wield significant power that includes support from

trustees, important alumni, and vocal donors. It may be essential for the athletics director, under such circumstances, to be highly engaged with these employees, stay vigilantly aware of what is going on in their programs, serve as a trusted collaborator, and know when to confront issues.

3. Program Priorities and Risk. The third condition is to analyze which program areas hold the highest level of priority or risk. If the department's physical plant is the largest barrier to success, the associate director for development may be instrumental in securing the funds needed for capital projects and should be a direct report to the athletics director. Similarly, the athletics director may determine that the inherent risks associated with sports medicine coupled with a strained relationship between coaches who want their athletes back in action and a medical/training staff who refuse to clear them to play is reason enough to have the assistant director for sports medicine report directly to him or her. It would surely send a message to coaches that there is no gray area when determining the participation status of injured athletes.
4. Supervisor Capabilities. The athletics director must assess who is capable of being the supervisor for the remaining senior managers. There is a strong possibility that the best choice has not evolved from the direct reports already selected. Is there an associate director of personnel or chief operating officer who can serve as the second in command who has demonstrated high level decision making skills and the ability to mediate a variety of issues before they rise to the athletics director's level? If not, should there be?

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