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Challenged by the Millennial G...

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It has become increasingly important that athletics directors provide opportunities for coaches and staff to become better educated about the characteristics of this Millennial Generation. Who are these college students born between 1980 and 2000 and do they present different challenges for coaches and administrators?

It is never good to overemphasize stereotypes or focus too much on broad generalizations about any groups, but the frustration coaches are feeling about the lack of responsibility, commitment, competitiveness, and leadership of their players is very real. As a way of starting the conversation, I believe that there are three important things coaches can do to turn some of their frustration into forward thinking strategies:

1. Embrace the notion that student-athletes really don't know how to behave differently. In this environment of the "helicopter" parents, many student-athletes have never been allowed to fail or deal with inadequacies, whether real or perceived. All the bumps in the road of life have been smoothed over for them. They have very little experience confronting adversity. In fact, they may

not even recognize when adversity exists. Players are not being purposefully disrespectful or uncommitted, they just haven't had enough practice dealing with a variety of situations, problem solving, and seeing the results of their actions. The whole concept of "cause and effect" may be quite foreign to them. Coaches cannot expect these players to be intuitive. They need to be prepared to help players recognize those links between behavior and results and assist them in the problem solving process.

2. Recognize that the concept of explaining "why" has taken on new significance. Sports educators have always known that student-athletes will perform much more effectively when they know exactly why a motor skill or a strategy should be performed in a very specific way under a variety of circumstances. Those same principles should be applied to athletes' behavior, as a team member and as an individual. It is essential to explain the "athletic environment". This generation of players has experienced parity in sport. Everyone got to play a certain number of innings; everyone got a trophy, and the concept of a skills hierarchy determining starting teams or scholarship recipients is almost foreign. Explaining why accommodations must be made when you are part of a group, why there are specific roles based on talent, and what types of interactions are appropriate is essential. One of the toughest challenges is getting student-athletes to embrace leadership roles. All players must understand why leaders are important to teams and why team members must encourage and support strong leadership. Again, nothing should be taken for granted. Explaining "why" takes time but in the long run it will be worth it.
3. Be aware that all of the coaches actions are internalized by everyone on the team. Some of the current literature suggests that over the past few years, this "me" generation has changed to the "we" generation. Student-athletes seem to have an inflated sense of empathy for their peers. I have definitely seen this when reading end of the year coach evaluations. More and more athletes write that coaches are "too hard" on certain players or that they hear coaches say disrespectful things on the sideline about players in the game. My sense is that they not only feel bad for those players but it makes them wonder what the coach is saying about themselves. Many student-athletes have grown up being told that they are the best, the brightest, and capable of almost anything. Unfortunately, it has led to a generation of young adults who have an inflated sense of self-confidence. Their reaction to criticism, whether it is toward themselves or others, often emotes a "how dare you" response. Therefore, it is really important that coaches give feedback that is constructive and with purpose and refrain from saying things out of frustration.

Athletics Directors should not be surprised if they have to use these same principles when interacting with young coaches. Sometimes I have to remind myself that they are a product of the millennial generation as well and have similar characteristics.

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