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Terminating a Popular Coach

Most managers agree that one of the most difficult tasks they face is firing an employee. When that employee is a coach, especially a popular coach or one who is highly visible in the community, the process is even more stress¬ful. Yet few textbooks help the athletic director deal with this common challenge. The problem to be solved is how to terminate a popular coach while handling all of the stakeholders interested or upset about this personnel decision. Although chapter 6 deals with personnel and building a staff, the following discussion approaches this issue from a leadership and complex problem-solving perspective.

Consultation With Human Resources

As soon as nonrenewal or termination of employment is being considered by any supervi¬sor, coach, or any staff member, the institutional or school district human resources office should be contacted for advice. Having a written record of evaluations, corrective action, or other evi¬dence supporting the decision is critical if a lawsuit eventually ensues. The earlier the athletic director is reminded of these responsibilities, the more likely it is that the employee's personnel file will fully support the termination or nonre¬newal decision.

Consultation With Legal Counsel

In any termination decision for cause (such as violation of NCAA or high school association rules, commission of a felony, or refusal to follow instructions of a supervisor), if a multiyear employment agreement exists, or the termina¬tion is either for cause or not (dissatisfaction with performance of a team) of a high-profile coach, even if he or she is an at-will employee, the human resources office will most likely rec¬ommend that legal counsel become an additional advisor.

Consultation With Higher Administration

Any individual's employment might be termi¬nated for many reasons, and whenever this happens, both the athletic director and the employee face challenging emotional stress. But the decision to fire a coach is even more difficult because of the number of stakeholders directly and indirectly affected—from the coach's cur¬rent student-athletes, their parents, and the assistant coaching staff and their families to athletes being recruited, their families, former student-athletes, alumni, and fans. The stake¬holders increase in number and importance for a high-profile athletic program, which may be just as true for a small tightly knit community with regard to its high school program as it is for a nationally recognized

university. At some institu¬tions, major donors, powerful business people, members of the institution's governing board or school board, and state legislators or city council members may try to get involved. Thus, consul¬tation with higher administration is essential. The athletic director must remember that the president or principal is ultimately responsible for the conduct of the athletic program and the institution. Any contact with elected officials, influential alumni, important members of the business community, or major donors should be made by the president or principal or superin¬tendent of schools, or such contact agreed upon through a conversation with the athletic direc¬tor. At the college level, when consulting with higher administration, the athletic director and the athletic department faculty representative should be operating as a team.

When the Termination Should Occur

Although most personnel actions take place at the end of an academic year, decisions on ter¬mination of coaches at the college level usually occur at the end of a season to try to recoup some portion of the recruiting period. In some cases, coaches are fired midseason. If a midsea¬son termination does occur, every effort must be made to make sure that the transition staff (current assistant coaches) are prepared and sup¬ported through this period. Even if the coach is terminated at the end of the sport season, plans must be put in place to deal with the period until the new coach is in place and through the orientation and introduction of the new coach to key stakeholders. As the athletic director thinks through this process, a first priority must be personally communicating with and meeting the needs of student-athletes, who are the least prepared to deal with a significant life change.

Dealing With Media Pressures Before the Announcement of a Decision

Often, especially in high-profile programs, the media may sense that the coach is in trouble and pressure the athletic director for his or her thoughts on retaining the coach. The best response is to refer to athletic department policy on employee evaluation: "We annually evaluate the performance of all our coaches. This evalua¬tion does not happen until the end of the season. Any decision on employee retention will not be made until that time."

Thoughts on Reasons for Termination

Termination for cause is an easier decision in many ways than firing a coach for other rea¬sons because the decision is clear. The coach has crossed a well-defined line—he or she has broken rules, committed a felony, violated a contract, or committed some other such action. Termination for other reasons such as lack of control of player behavior; poor graduation rates or substandard academic performance of players; lack of competitive success; or poor effort, performance, or attitude on the part of players is a more difficult decision because this lack of essential coaching skills is realized gradually over time. Usually no clear line has been crossed or no specific thing has happened. Most likely, the athletic director has made a number of efforts to inform the coach of these deficiencies, the coach has probably been given time to remedy the issues, and clear communica¬tion may have been made that failure to show improvement would result in termination of employment. But these situations are often less clear with regard to determining that the coach cannot make the necessary changes. For instance, improvement may occur, but it is insufficient or uneven. Or, a revered and well-liked coach who was initially successful shows deteriorating performance as the nature of student-athletes change, recruiting becomes more competitive, or his or her coaching skills are not continually updated. Ultimately, the athletic director is the one who understands the deficiencies and is the closest observer of daily performance and rela¬tionships with players and staff. The decision rests with the athletic director.

Even if internal or external stakeholders ratchet up the pressure, the proverbial buck stops on the

athletic director's desk. The ath¬letic director must be comfortable with his or her assessment, which really comes down to the student-athlete experience not being what it should be and lack of confidence that the coach has the ability to remedy the situation over the near term. Notice this focus on the student-athlete experience. Even the most suc¬cessful coach, as measured by wins and losses or conference and national championships won, cannot be salvaged if student-athlete health and well-being is sacrificed in the process.

What happens if the athletic director is told to fire the coach? If the athletic director agrees with the action, the decision becomes his or hers. If the athletic director disagrees, only two choices remain: (1) refuse to terminate the employee and offer his or her resignation or (2) agree to do the termination or an alternative to a termination as described later. In the case of the latter, the termination must become the athletic director's decision. Blame cannot be placed elsewhere, publicly or privately.

Alternatives to Termination

Especially in the case of long-time coaches who have earned the respect of generations of student-athletes, faculty, and alumni but have lost their effectiveness on the playing fields or in the recruiting wars, consideration should be given to moving that coach to another position in the department, the university, or the school system. Could the relationships developed over decades serve the athletic department well in the athletic or institutional development office at the college level? Is a place available in the physical education department where years of coaching experience can be used to train future coaches? Is early retirement an option? Is resignation a possibility, and if so can this decision by the coach be enhanced by the offer of an attractive severance package? Sometimes the athletic direc¬tor has the luxury of negotiating a departure at a specified time. The athletic director may inform the coach that employment will be terminated at the end of the next season, giving the coach time to seek another job and having the option of tendering a resignation instead of being fired. In certain situations, all these possibilities should be explored with the intent of producing a win–win as opposed to facing the challenge of a termination of employment.

Laying Out the Termination Sequence

But let's assume that the situation is such that the coach is unwilling to resign and is going to be fired or the coach is going to resign under the threat of termination. The athletic director should be aware that after the departure deci¬sion is communicated to the coach, chances are that the decision will quickly leak to assistant coaches, student-athletes, the media, and others. Thus, to control the accuracy of communication, a plan must be developed to have the following actions happen sequentially, one immediately after the other, and some actions possibly occurring simultaneously:

1. Inform the head coach.
2. Meet with the assistant coaches.
3. Meet with the student-athletes.
4. The president places personal phone calls to the chair of the board of trustees (or the superintendent calls the school board) and selected other influential stakeholders
5. Conduct press conference or inform the press.
6. Inform other stakeholders (athletic depart¬ment staff, institution administrative officers, faculty, other donors, parents of current student-athletes, former student-athletes of the coach).
7. At the college level, communicate with student-athletes who are being recruited.

The athletic director must do all items except that the president or principal or superintendent deals with

item 4, communicating with the trustees, elected officials, administrative offi¬cers, faculty, and top donors by personal phone calls or messages. At the college level, the vice president for development can help with other major donors. Communications with the parents of student-athletes and former student-athletes can be by e-mail followed by formal letter. In this day of instant communication, snail mail is a formality and e-mail is the optimum choice.

Executing the Termination Plan

Following are some thoughts about execut¬ing the termination plan. The athletic director, higher administration, the vice president for development (at the college level), and the head of athletic and institutional or school district communications should meet to develop the exact timeline; determine who will attend each session; and approve formal press releases, e-mail communications, the formal statements to be made at the press conference, and so on. This planning process is much like managing a football or basketball game; a timeline should be produced that specifies when everything is supposed to happen.

Step 1: Communicating the Termination Decision to the Head Coach Coach termi¬nation meetings are of two types: one in which the purpose of the meeting is a done deal in that when the meeting ends, the coach's employment will be terminated by the institution, and the other in which the coach has accepted the alter¬native of resignation, retirement, or acceptance of an alternative non-coaching position. In both, the decision is final with regard to termination of the coaching position. In the case of the latter, the termination meeting may focus on the athletic department, institution, and coach statements regarding the departure and a review of the timetable for meetings with assistant coaches, the team, and the media. With regard to the former situation (termination is the only option), the athletic director needs to walk into this meeting with full confidence in the finality of his or her decision and be prepared to take full responsibility for it. At this point, laying blame on the president, alumni, or the board of trustees is unprofessional, even if there was pressure. If details to the severance are present, such as the institution's meeting contractual obligations to pay out the remainder of the contract, or being relieved of such obligations because of the rea¬sons for termination, or offering a buy-out or severance even though one is not required in order to avoid media debate, the athletic director must be prepared to deliver all these messages clearly, finalize the deal and any conditions, and have the result be closure.

Step 2: Communicating the Head Coach Termination to the Assistant Coaches The next meeting for the athletic director is with the assistant coaches. The head coach should not be present. The athletic director should com¬municate (1) the reasons for his or her decision, being frank, (2) the commitment of the institu¬tion to fulfill the institution's employment com¬mitment to the assistant coaches, (3) the desire of the athletic director to work closely with the assistant coaches in dealing with student-athlete issues and ensure a smooth transition to the new head coach, (4) whether assistant coaches will be considered for the head coach position if they wish to apply, (5) that the decision to renew the employment agreements of assistant coaches shall rest with the new head coach, and (6) that assistant coaches are immediately free to seek new employment and that if the athletic direc¬tor can be of assistance with recommendations, he or she will provide such help. The athletic director should state that any assistant coach who thinks that he or she cannot operate in a positive and professional manner that is fully supportive of the institution's decision should consider resigning immediately, knowing that the institution will provide two weeks of sever¬ance pay (or none, or whatever the institution decides). The athletic director should also make clear that the institution is committed to hiring an outstanding replacement and that this is the message that all staff members should be deliver¬ing to student-athletes, who will be represented on the search committee.

The athletic director should also explain the sequence of meetings occurring after the assis¬tant coaches meeting—the meeting with athletes, press conference, and so forth. Consideration should be given to having the sports informa¬tion director or school district communications officer present to distribute copies of the press release to the assistant coaches and discuss appropriate responses to media questions. Time should be allotted for questions. If an assistant coach has a multiyear employment agreement, which may be the case in a Division I college institution, the athletic director has to make additional decisions with regard to offering a buy-out or other action, which should occur, of course, in a separate one-on-one meeting.

The assistant coaches should then be invited to the student-athletes' meeting, but it should be explained that the meeting is for the athletes and that assistant coaches should not be asking questions or raising issues. They should just be listening carefully so that they understand the athletes' concerns and can ensure that their subsequent conversations with student-athletes are in full alignment with the athletic director's position. Last but not least, at the college level, all the assistant coaches should meet with the athletic director or senior staff administrator overseeing their sport to determine the contents of e-mails or phone calls that are to be made to all recruiting prospects that evening.

ciates the service of the resigning or reassigned head coach and with the head coach making an appropriate statement in this regard; (2) that the athletic director will work closely with the assistant coaches in dealing with student-athlete issues and ensuring a smooth transition to the new head coach; (3) that the team will be asked to select a representative to serve on the search committee to select a new head coach and that this person is responsible for communicating to the search committee those criteria or qualifica¬tions of candidates most important to student-athletes; (4) whether assistant coaches will be considered for the head coach position if they wish to apply, being frank that only applicants with at least X number of years experience as a head coach will be considered if that is the case; and (5) that the decision to renew the employ¬ment agreements of assistant coaches shall rest with the new head coach.

The floor should then be open for questions. Again, the sports information director or district communications officer should be present and should distribute copies of the press release to the student-athletes, explain¬ing that a press conference or meetings with the athletic director and the media will occur next. Recommendations should be made about responding to media questions, urging students to focus on the positives of their experience with the departing head coach and their apprecia¬tion for his or her commitment. A discussion should occur about the importance of not being drawn into making negative comments. If the student-athletes don't agree with the institution's decision, they should be assured that no one is stopping them from saying anything, but they should be urged to think about how they want to communicate whatever they think. Respectfully disagreeing with the institutional decision is one thing; responding emotionally or with anger is another, especially if the student-athlete is not knowledgeable of everything that went into the decision. Student-athletes should also be told that not speaking to the media is fine, if they are not comfortable doing so.
A question may be asked like, "What if we want our captain to respond for the entire team?" This approach should be acceptable and may be an excellent learning experience for all team members. At this point, the team should be allowed to meet for this purpose. The sports information director or district communications officer should offer to help student-athletes draft or issue a press release.

Step 4: Informing the Chair of the Board of Trustees and Selected Major Donors As the athletic director moves into the meeting with student-athletes, if the president determines that the board of trustees of

the institution needs to be informed, or at the high school level, if the principal and superintendent agree that the school board members should be informed, these calls should be made by the president or principal or superintendent respectively. The same approach should be used with the most influential donors and stakeholders. The athletic director should be involved in these decisions, and at the college level the vice president for development and the head of development for the athletic department should be part of these strategic conversations. Typically, there will be collaboration and agreement about which staff member will call these supporters and donors. All these decisions are made in the preliminary meeting with higher administration before the start of the termination sequence.

Step 5: Meeting With the Media For a high-profile college or high school program that attracts high media interest, conducting a press conference is the best way to prevent one media company from scooping another. For high schools or colleges with low media profiles, the sports information director may simply make phone calls and then e-mail press releases to local radio, television, and newspaper sports reporters. These contacts should occur immediately after the meetings with the coach, assistant coaches, and student-athletes are completed. The athletic director should be available for phone calls or one-on-one interviews with the media. If a press conference is conducted regarding coach termi¬nation, the terminated coach should not be pres-ent. The athletic director would read a prepared statement and then be open to questions. If the situation is a resignation, retirement, or reassign¬ment, the athletic director would open with an announcement of the coach's departure, thank the coach for his or her service, and then have the coach make his or her own statement, which has been jointly developed in concert with the insti-tution. The coach and the athletic director will have met with the sports information director and possibly the institutional or school district communications director, to discuss responses to all possible questions that might be raised.

Step 6: Informing Other Stakeholders In any situation in which a head coach is ter¬minated and a press release is issued to that effect, the athletic director should communicate this decision by e-mail to all athletic depart¬ment coaches and staff members and issue a copy of the press release. This should be done immediately after the meetings with the coach, assistant coaches, and student-athletes of the affected team. If necessary, a larger institutional e-mail to faculty and staff should occur at this time. All institutions have electronic communi¬cation mechanisms to make announcements to all faculty and staff. Communication by e-mail, if possible, followed by snail mail may also need to be initiated to all donors to the sport program, parents of current student-athletes, and former student-athletes. Such decisions are made based on analysis of circumstances. These broad announcements should be made only in the case of high-profile decisions, not all coach personnel decisions. If the decision rises to this level of broad interest, the faculty and staff announcement should be a statement from the president, announcing the athletic director's decision and his or her support for it along with a copy of the press release. Communications to lower-level athletic donors, parents of current student-athletes, and former student-athletes should come from the athletic director.

Step 7: Communicating With Recruits at the College Level Immediately after the press conference, the athletic director and senior staff member overseeing the affected sport program should meet with the assistant coaches to determine the appropriate way to communicate with recruits—those who have already signed letters of intent and those who are still undecided. Rules regarding whether athletes are obligated to attend the institution should be reviewed. Formal communications should be drafted depending on recruiting status. Personal phone calls may precede e-mails and snail mail. Every effort must be made to encourage undecided recruits to wait until the new coach is appointed before they make their college decision.

Planning for a Positive Transition

Attention must be directed to ensuring that the student-athlete experience during the period following termination and before the arrival of the new coach on campus is as positive and organized as possible. The athletic director or senior staff administrator over the affected sport should have a planning meeting with assistant coaches to determine all the tasks that need to be accomplished and who is assigned respon-sibility for each duty. The need for additional team or personal meetings with student-athletes should be discussed. Athletic department senior student affairs and academic support staff mem¬bers should be included in this meeting. After that plan has been determined, the senior staff member over the affected sport should have a weekly meeting with the assistant coaches to review the plan's progress, make necessary adjustments, or make decisions regarding new problems encountered.

Concluding Comment

The bottom line in any termination process is that the athletic director must think through all possible situations and know how to handle them. The termination announcement sequence is important, requiring both precise timing and planning. The difference between a successful and unsuccessful coaching transition often lies in this incredible attention to detail.

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The above content is an excerpt from Lopiano, D. and Zotos, C. (2013) Athletic Director's Desk Reference. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics. This publication includes over 300 customizable and downloadable policies, forms and planning tools.

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