

Building a Positive Team Culture: The Task of the Head Coach

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Introduction

A head collegiate track and field coach's job depends on how well his or her athletes perform. For athletes to perform well, they must have many tools in their arsenal. Speed, endurance, strength, mental toughness, and determination are among the few key tools an athlete needs in order to be individually successful in the sport of track and field. Furthermore, there are specific skill sets for each event area, which requires a separate coach that is an expert in that discipline to help hone. At a passing glance, it seems almost impossible for the sport of track and field to be a team sport, yet the most successful coaches have successful teams, not just successful athletes. Thus, head coaches are faced with a significant challenge to bring all of these pieces together and give athletes additional team-based skills to form a unit that is collectively successful.

Many questions loom for the head track and field coach. How do you create a team atmosphere with so much diversity on a team? How do you create unity when athletes compete in completely different events? How do you create a cohesive coaching staff with coaches that are specialized in different event areas? And perhaps one of the most important questions of all, how do you build and maintain a positive team culture, one that persists over time? Positive team culture is defined as an environment where all team members, staff and athletes alike, express values, attitudes, and beliefs that promote positive emotions, individual accomplishments, and team success. The answer to this final question may arguably be the root of any team's success or lack of success. A team that is positive, supports one another, is optimistic, and understands that it is about more than themselves is better able to persevere through challenges and better position themselves to win.

Being able to instill a positive team culture among my athletes is something that I will rely on in order to be successful in my career as a coach. While this can be particularly difficult in the sport of track and field, as the different event areas may practice at different times, in different locations, with different coaches, it is a crucial part of being a truly successful coach. This paper aims to answer the research question, “What do coaches do in order to build a positive team culture?”

Review of the Literature

Prior to examining how to build a positive team culture, it is necessary to examine why a positive team culture is important. Cohen and Bailey (1997) examined group effectiveness for a wide array of organizational teams. One of the key findings of their research was the positive correlation between group cohesiveness and performance, meaning that teams that were unified and worked well together were more likely to be high performing. To create group cohesiveness, West, Patera, and Carsten (2009) found that team optimism was important when teams were newly formed, while team resilience and team efficacy were important as teams continued to work together.

There was no one leadership style noted that led to group cohesiveness, a positive team culture, or optimism. Goleman (2000) noted six basic leadership styles (coercive, authoritative, affiliative, democratic, pacesetter, and coaching) and stated that leaders who mastered most, if not all, of these leadership styles had the best team climate and performance. Furthermore, certain leadership styles were found to have a particularly strong positive or negative impact on various aspects of climate. For example, an authoritative leadership style was found to have a strong positive correlation with the rewards driver of team climate, while the pacesetter

leadership style was found to have a strong negative correlation with the rewards driver (Goleman, 2000).

Kanter (1999) acknowledged the fact that the leader must be the one to manage the culture of the group. Each member of the group, however, has personal reasons for continuing to be a member of the group. As Hollander and Offerman (1997) noted, people who follow a particular leader or are part of a particular team enjoy the people they are around, have a shared vision, and believe they may be the start of something meaningful. Leaders are able to influence the culture of the group, however, by facilitating drivers of positive team culture and acting as a positive role model. Huber (2013) stated that “coaches and athletes need to be aware of positive and negative attitudes, then work toward accentuating positive attitudes and avoiding negative ones” (p. 105). Huber (2013) also noted that the coach should be aware of whom the athletes observe as role models; operant conditioning principles provided by the coach will allow for him/her to control who becomes a model.

Heifetz and Linsky (2002) argued that the leader needs to model the desired behavior for his/her followers. This idea relates to Kouzes and Posner's (2010) eighth truth, "You either lead by example or you don't lead at all" (p. 105), or the idea that you have to "do what you say you'll do" (p. 107). The leader, or coach, needs to be the person that facilitates the desired behavior. Huber (2013) makes the point that people model select observed behaviors from other people; on a team, this could be a coach or another athlete. Therefore, the coach needs to ensure that not only he/she is a positive influence, but also that any of the athletes would also be a positive influence.

Methodology

Key informant interviews were conducted with successful Division I head track and field coaches. “Successful” was defined as (1) winning at least one team conference championship in the past 5 years; (2) winning at least one team regional and/or national championship in the past 5 years; and/or (3) having multiple athletes qualify for the track and field national meet in multiple event areas every year for the past 5 years. Coaches were initially contacted via email, and then phone or Skype interviews were scheduled.

The initial email requested the coach’s time to complete a brief 15-minute interview regarding research on building a positive team culture. It was noted that the interview could be conducted over the phone or via Skype at their convenience. Prior to the interview with each coach, the list of four questions, outlined in Appendix A, was emailed to better prepare each for the interview and to help the interview run smoothly.

Phone interviews were not recorded, but notes were taken as to what the coaches’ responses to the questions were. Each interview began with a brief background and rationale of the research question, as well as how the results would be used. During the closing moments of the interview, each coach was also asked for open-ended advice for young coaches. After the completion of the interview, the handwritten notes were typed up and saved.

Findings and Conclusion

Four coaches were interviewed. Upon reviewing notes from each individual interview, several themes emerged. The first theme was that a positive culture starts at the top. Two out of four informants referred to the fact that the head coach has to act the way he/she wants his/her

team to act. In other words, if the coach wants to have a positive atmosphere, then the coach needs to be positive his or herself.

The second theme that emerged was communication. All informants noted the importance of having the entire coaching staff on the same page. One informant noted that she implemented formal staff meetings at least once per week to ensure frequent communication with all staff members and to better gauge the camaraderie of her staff as a whole. She noted that these meetings allowed for open communication where the coaches could express themselves and resolve issues before they became concerns, such as discrepancies with practice times or team discipline. Another informant noted that having an open environment makes it easier for a staff member to clearly communicate what he/she needs without fear of punishment from the head coach, which creates a trusting, positive staff culture and takes a step toward a positive team culture. Finally, one informant noted that open communication works best when the head coach hires staff members that share a common goal, belief, and determination. She noted that doing so results in fewer arguments and allows all coaches more time focus on the team.

The second theme of communication was continued beyond staff communication into communication with the team as a whole. All of the informants noted having regular team meetings, though the intervals varied (i.e. weekly, monthly). One coach noted that his athletes practice at different times and in different locations based on event area, and because of this, makes it even more important for the head coach to gather the entire team together to gain the sense of the team atmosphere. Informants all noted slightly different purposes for these meetings, but all the purposes served to instill a positive team atmosphere. One informant noted that it is important to reiterate what the goal for the entire team is for the season each meeting. Another informant stated that the meetings should give the athletes an opportunity to voice their opinions,

keeping an open line of communication between the entire coaching staff and the athletes, and helping to form a sense of trust.

The third theme that emerged was a focus on the future. Three out of four informants had their athletes express personal goals and expectations to the coaching staff, as well as team goals and expectations. One informant noted that he sits down with each athlete individually to discuss the athlete's goals and expectations compared to the coach's goals and expectations. Another informant had a team meeting to discuss team goals and expectations, where the athletes collectively set and agreed upon the team goals for that season. Informants noted how a focus on the future and open communication go hand-in-hand. Informants also noted that goals and expectations should not be imposed on athletes. Rather, the goals that are set by the athletes themselves tend to hold more meaning to the athletes and therefore may be worked toward even harder.

The fourth and final theme that emerged from the key informant interviews was developing positive athlete-to-athlete relationships. One such approach, as noted by one informant, was to have seniors and freshmen pair up (i.e. seniors check in with freshmen about courses, come to team meetings together, etc.). The informant noted that there is a big age difference between the two athletes and it can be intimidating for a freshman to be around a senior, regardless of talent level. This can lead to poor relationships among athletes on the team and to a poor team culture. Having senior-freshmen pairs can aid in team-building and improved trust with one another. Furthermore, seniors can share team tradition and offer advice to the freshmen, letting them know that they are welcome and a vital part of the team. Another informant noted having team-building activities scattered throughout the season, with a particular focus on the first team gathering.

The four themes can be incorporated into one's coaching philosophy to help the head coach build a positive team culture. To look at the importance of these four themes, let's examine what a team culture might look like when each theme is incorporated and when each theme is not incorporated. Starting from the top of the team down, the head coach should be the person to implement the positive atmosphere. When this happens, he/she shows a positive attitude around the workplace, with the other members of the coaching staff, and at practice with the athletes. Other staff members may feed off the positive attitude from the head coach and develop positive attitudes themselves. This would mean each athlete, regardless of event area, is exposed to a positive coach at practice, which may in turn improve the positive attitudes among the athletes. Conversely, if the head coach displays a negative attitude around the workplace, with the other members of the coaching staff, and at practice with the athletes, this negative attitude is likely to have a ripple effect as well. Thus, the negative head coach is starting off by spreading negativity through the team, a step away from building a positive team culture.

Moving to communication, the head coach should be up front and honest with each member of the coaching staff, as well as each athlete. The head coach should also listen to what the other coaches and athletes have to say. If the head coach does this, it may create an environment where the staff member and athletes are not intimidated by the head coach. It may also create an environment where each staff member and athlete feels valued and that he/she has a voice, which can create positivity in and of itself. In addition, the staff and team begin to trust the head coach. When this happens, it will be much easier for the team to buy into the head coach's philosophy and training methods, which in turn may lead to more success and further positivity among the team. On the other hand, if the head coach is not honest and does not listen to the other coaches and athletes, it will create a hierarchy that could be intimidating. Such a

hierarchy can make staff members and athletes alike not feel valued or important, a feeling that is likely to lead to negativity. Finally, an environment that is not open and honest and does not allow for open communication may lead to a lack of trust between the head coach and the rest of the team. This may make athletes question the training philosophy, not buy-in complete, and lead to underperforming on the track, a scenario that is likely to lead to further negativity among the team.

A focus on the future was also important, and head coaches that do so always keep the big picture in mind. This reminds the athletes and coaches that success is a process and does not simply happen overnight. It may also remove some pressure from athletes for each individual performance because no one performance is viewed as the benchmark for success. When coaches do not focus on the future, athletes may lack a sense of purpose or get hung up on one single performance. This may increase pressure on athletes or may lead to a team that is not cohesive and on the same page. Both scenarios would likely increase negativity among the team.

Finally, coaches should develop positive athlete-to-athlete relationships. When a coach does so, the team will likely become a support system for all the members. It will also likely eliminate segregation on the team due to age, experience, or ability, and take a large step forward toward team cohesion. If a coach does not focus on developing positive athlete-to-athlete relationships, cliques or silos may develop on the team which disrupts team cohesion. It may also interfere with team trust, both among athletes and with the coaching staff, or directly lead to negative relationships between athletes.

Summary

As a college cross country and track coach, finding ways to create an ideal positive team atmosphere is essential. After researching the question, “What do coaches do to build a positive team culture,” several themes emerged. The leader, or coach, must be the person to model the desired behavior of his/her athletes. People naturally model certain behaviors and positivity can be one of them. The coach must also communicate to the coaching staff and athletes often. This will allow for everyone to be on the same page and have an understanding of what the goals for the team are. The coach must demonstrate that focusing on the future is essential to have a positive mindset. By looking towards the future, athletes may not have to dwell on a performance or experience that may have been negative. Finally, having good athlete-to-athlete relationships is important to build team unity. By combining all of these tasks and traits, a positive team atmosphere will be formed.

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Appendix A

1. With track & field being a somewhat individualized sport, how do you build a team atmosphere, manage individual egos, and work toward one common goal (ensure a team environment in a sport that focuses on the individual)?
2. In what ways have you worked to build a positive team culture? Specific strategies used to deal with the team changing (i.e. seniors graduating, incoming freshman, and transfers).
3. How does the coaching staff impact team culture?
4. How does the team culture impact the success of the team?