

CULTURE or WINNING?

How do you measure your success?

As our game becomes more and more professional at the various levels of the sport, there is an increasing trend amongst coaches to be results driven, with their primary focus being purely on winning games. However does simply examining the Win and Loss columns tell the complete story of the coach's worth, a team's development, or the success of a season?

Our outlook as coaches profoundly influences how we coach our teams and how our players develop under our direction. Importantly this also impacts the degree of enjoyment and satisfaction that our players derive from their experiences in the game.

Throughout my long involvement in rugby I have experienced coaches with philosophies at each end of the spectrum. Without doubt those who worked to build a strong culture within the group first and foremost almost always achieved a greater unity, sense of achievement and all-round success than those were primarily seeking to 'win every game'.

"The culture precedes positive results. It doesn't get tacked on as an afterthought on your way to the victory stand. Champions behave like champions before they are champions: they have a winning standard of performance before they are winners."

Bill Walsh – San Francisco 49ers NFL Head Coach 1981-88

DEFINING CULTURE

Defining exactly what 'Culture' is can be a challenge in itself. It is not an exact science and will often be interpreted differently between organisations. Essentially though, culture is to sporting teams what personality is to an individual (Melton, 2015). It represents the clearly defined, shared set of values and beliefs of the team, and is consistently expressed through the actions and behaviours of its individual members.

Tregonning (2010) discusses many strategies that can be used to create the positive team environment that is required, and rightly emphasises that ultimately for the culture to be successful it needs to have been deliberately created by the players themselves. Coaches and leaders are often well placed to facilitate the process by encouraging an inclusive and collaborative environment where everyone contributes their own thoughts equally. This is critical if the players are to have the sense of ownership required to 'Walk the Talk' once the framework for their environment has been established. Situations where the players

are left to build the culture ‘by chance’ or where it is determined beforehand by the coaches or management and then forced onto the playing group are almost always doomed for failure.

The attitude of the group toward personal and group development also plays a significant role in the culture of a team. An environment where a Growth Mindset (Dweck, 2006) is encouraged allows the individual players the freedom and support to learn and improve, by risking failure to achieve success.

CHARACTERISTICS OF MINDSET (Dweck, 2006)	
CLOSED MINDSET	OPEN MINDSET
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Avoid challenges. Do what is comfortable - Give up when faced with obstacles - Effort is fruitless - Ignore feedback for fear of criticism - Believe failing means they are not good at it - See other peoples success as being due to luck - Do the same thing over and over - “Im just good at it or Im not, I cant change it” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Embrace challenges. Get outside comfort zone - Persist despite obstacles - See effort as the path to mastery - Seek and learn from feedback - View failing as a learning opportunity - Are inspired by others success - Try new things to seek solutions - “I can learn anything I want to ”

While people with a Fixed Mindset believe that their basic abilities such as intelligence and talent are set from birth and will remain unchanged throughout life, those with a Growth Mindset have the opposing view. Their outlook is that our given abilities are just the starting point and similar to muscles, they have the capacity to develop and improve with hard work and persistence (Dweck, 2006).

Growth mindset people view obstacles as challenges to learn from and overcome rather than unconquerable blockages to avoid. These moments of self-discovery really empower our players and develop the resilience, creativity and a motivation for further learning.

It must be acknowledged that Culture is just one component of any performance environment, together with Strategy, Resources and Capabilities (Melton, 2015). The need to constantly evaluate and improve planning and strategies, operating systems, and athlete development is paramount and must be made in conjunction with improvements to team culture if meaningful success is to be achieved.

It is the Culture of an organisation that ties the other components together (Melton, 2015) giving greater meaning to other achievements due to the interpersonal nature of its benefits. From my experiences, it is the shared sense of belonging and common bonds of achievement forged through the adversity of group effort that brings the greatest satisfaction, as opposed to the pure attainment of a victory or championship title.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EACH ENVIRONMENT	
WINNING FOCUSED	CULTURE FOCUSED
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Results driven (Winning can mask over technical deficiencies which remain unaddressed) - Outcome focussed (Don't worry about the details, just get the job done) - Environment where only winning is tolerated. Making mistakes and losing are unacceptable - Coach centred learning which focuses on winning games. Self-improvement and player development is a lesser priority (Nothing else matters as long as the team wins, while improvements are irrelevant if the team loses). - Often the goals and values are set by the coach and passed down to the players which absolves them of ownership. - Team selections are week-to-week, based upon who will give the best chance of winning the next game (which erodes players trust, confidence and risk-taking) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Performance driven (Individual and team performance assessed and rectified at training regardless of result) - Process focussed (Attention to detail - Do what we have been working on well and the result will follow) - Rewards effort and work ethic. Mistakes and failures are viewed as learning experiences - Athlete centred learning which encourages self-improvement on and off the field. Players feel supported and risk failure to achieve success which promotes development - Player driven goals and values which creates ownership, builds camaraderie and defines the group. Players continue to adhere and uphold their standards for the group - Promotes 'Life Skills' (Responsibility for self, Accountability to self and others, strong work ethic, team first mentality) - Builds trust and respect within the group.

"... a team that is in constant conflict or has a negative atmosphere will bring team members, athletes and coaches alike, down and this unpleasant atmosphere will also hurt individual athletes' performances. Conversely, a team culture built on positive energy, support, and fun will lift everyone up, feel comfortable and supportive, and the results will show it.

Dr Jim Taylor, Univ. San Francisco - 'Build a Positive and High-Performing Sports Team Culture', 2013

BEING OUTCOME FOCUSED

From my experience being driven by winning is to be focussed on the outcome, rather than the high degree of variable inputs throughout a game which completely influence that outcome. If the game was just about winning, there would be no need to coach the fundamental rugby skills such as catch and pass, tackle technique, breakdown skills and attack/defence structures. We could simply open the coaching manual and go straight to the drills for winning...

In reality though, that section does not exist in any coaching manual and that presentation has never been made at any coaching course because it is not that simple.

“Concentrate on what will produce results rather than the results themselves; the processes rather than the prize.”

Bill Walsh – San Francisco 49ers NFL Head Coach 1981-88

Legendary Green Bay Packers NFL Hall of Fame coach Vince Lombardi once famously said “Winning is not everything, it is the only thing”. While this reflects the ‘results are what we are judged on’ outlook of many modern coaches, it does pose an interesting point.

Consider an Olympic coach, similarly results-driven and outcome-focussed to the rugby coaches discussed here. Would he consider his athlete a failure if they smashed their personal best time but did not make the final? What if the athlete had broken the previous world record, but finished fourth in the process? Surely they are still outstanding achievements to be celebrated even though they did not win a Gold medal?

Most of us grew up in an era when getting in, having a go and doing your absolute best was all that anyone would expect of you, even if you weren’t the fastest runner, highest jumper or have the most points when full-time came. How is this any different today? Do we expect any different from our own children? Would they be dropped from the family team if they didn’t come first in every spelling test or maths quiz? Or would we praise them for their effort and work with them to help them learn and tackle future challenges? Why then would we expect different from our players? Are we there so they can play, or are they there so we can coach???

Real coaching means we do need to teach and practice all of the different components of the game to facilitate their learning and development. Our players deserve that from us as coaches and in doing so we actually focus on the process and become driven by performance. This provides the opportunity for continual self-awareness and improvement which leads to greater consistency in their performances.

Real coaching is also about more than just the Xs and Os. When we promote a team first mentality we emphasise selfless traits in our players like the value of a strong work ethic, accountability and respect. When promoting an open mindset we are also helping to shape better people, not just better athletes, who will go on to become valuable members of their communities thanks to the lessons they learned from our coaching. This is something that would only come from a results driven outlook by chance.

The most successful sporting team in history, with a 76% winning record spanning over 100 years of competition, the All Blacks they have an extremely strong focus on their culture. Following a period of diminished results and questionable off-field behaviour which contributed to a disappointing exit from the 2003 World Cup, new coach Graham Henry initiated a thorough rebuilding of the culture. Based on the values of personal leadership and individual character (Kerr, 2010) the All Blacks now live by the mantra that “Better people make better All Blacks”.

“BETTER PEOPLE MAKE BETTER ALL BLACKS”

All Black mantra

In the period since they have played 157 Tests with an 87% winning ratio including two Rugby World Cup titles. It is fair to say that their renewed focus upon Culture has not been detrimental to their results. Humility and respect provide a substantial framework for their culture, even down to their well-publicised ‘Sweep the Sheds’ mentality, an action that has nothing to do with winning games.

A culture is the expression of a team's values, attitudes, and beliefs about sports and competition. It determines whether, for example, the team's focus is on fun, mastery, or winning or whether it promotes individual accomplishment or team success. The culture is grounded in an identified sense of mission and shared goals ... that permeates every aspect of a team's experience.

All of these qualities of a culture have real implications for how the team functions, how its members get along, and, crucially, how the athletes on the team perform and the results they get. When a team has a defined culture that is understood by all of its members, they feel an implicit pressure (in the good sense) to support that culture.

Dr Jim Taylor, Univ. San Francisco - ‘Build a Positive and High-Performing Sports Team Culture’, 2013

The Sydney Swans AFL club is another successful elite team to be driven by their strong culture. Their so-called ‘No dickheads’ policy engineered by Paul Roos when he took over as coach in 2003 epitomises the Bloods culture of hard work, respect, brutal honesty and an unwavering ‘we before me’ mentality. Since 2005 they have been to 4 AFL Grand Finals for 2 premiership wins, behind only Hawthorn (5 GF for 4 wins) and Geelong (4 GF for 3 wins), two clubs who are also well known for their strong culture and operational systems.

Though often misunderstood, the Swans culture is defined by its strong behavioural standards on and off the field, in particular the manner in which the senior players engage with the entire Swans organisation to uphold these values. Having been such a successful concept many other elite sporting teams, including the All Blacks have replicated specific philosophies from the Swans. The concept has also been successfully adopted by teams I have been involved with, where extremely talented players have been rejected because of their attitude and affect on the group. This has resulted in greater team harmony and improved performance.

The primary objective of building a positive team environment through strong culture should never be mistaken for a lack of competitiveness. Conversely, I would suggest that due to the process involved the results actually mean a great deal more to those coaches and players because they have invested far more of themselves to achieve their results. Their results are simply seen as an outcome from their performance, rather than a goal.

At community and schoolboy rugby it would appear much easier to focus on creating a strong culture rather than just focussing on winning because understandably there is less at stake. The degree of sponsorship dollars, broadcasting rights and media opportunities, corporate support, and shareholder interests are nowhere near the same scale as in professional sport. However the wants and needs of the players are just the same at the elite level as evidenced in Australian rugby over the previous few seasons.

Improper use of social media, numerous alcohol-fuelled incidents and repeated ill-disciplined infringements contrary to team protocols have cost several players tens of thousands of dollars in fines, suspensions and even playing contracts. The coaches at the time were each heavily criticised for their handling of each situation and the environment that enabled it. Ultimately it contributed heavily to them losing their positions while team performances and player satisfaction were inconsistent and at standards far below what is expected.

When the new coach was appointed it was hoped that his renowned strong leadership and focus on team culture would be a significant catalyst for change within Australian rugby. In just 12 months he has achieved significant on and off-field success and from all indicators rebuilt a strong and positive team environment within the squad. Interestingly this has been accomplished with a largely similar playing group to previous coaches who are now playing strongly for each other with resolve, support and intent.

CONCLUSION

Experiences and research have shown the significant contribution a positive environment plays in the success of a team, alongside the development of quality systems, improved resources and increased capabilities across a program.

Our real strength as coaches is not in how much we know, but in how much our players actually learn. When we share a growth attitude and get to know our players we are able to create endless opportunities for development, satisfaction and ongoing success.

By focussing not on outcomes but taking the time to build and maintain a positive culture the results follow and we actually win anyway.

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