

Jay Tregonning – Level 3, Task 12, Creating a positive team environment

Creating a positive team environment is an essential part of the success of any team. The end goal for any coach is on field success. However, it is essential that the sole direction towards this success is not on-field training alone. Coaches can ensure that training is fun and motivating for their athletes, but that is only a small step in creating a positive environment. Successful teams that I have been associated with in the past have all had one thing in common, off-field structures and strategies that create a positive environment. A positive environment can promote enjoyment, unity and ultimately a culture that will initiate and maintain success. It is essential for teams like the NSW Country Cockatoo's where the players are brought together from all over the state for a short and very intense season. It is equally important for other rugby clubs that participate throughout a regular season. The following paper will discuss research from sporting and business organisations on the importance of, and different ways to develop a positive team environment. It encompasses examples of off field strategies that have been successful for different teams that I have been involved with throughout the past few years.

Develop Team Values

To build an extraordinary team your group needs to be clear about its purpose (values) and principle (direction) Davis (2006). Clements (2007, p 6) states that "a successful team is more than a group of players that train together, it is more than a collection of players all wearing a team uniform, and it is far greater than a selection of individuals who compete under a common team name. Rather, a successful team is made up of a group of individuals who decide to embrace a one-for-all and all-for-one attitude to create and achieve identified goals." Team values would be identified as one of the most important aspects in creating team cohesion, a positive team environment. Carron and Hausenblas, cited in Clements (2007) suggest that for any sporting team to be successful they must possess a common identity, have common goals and objectives, hold common perceptions about group structure and consider themselves to be a team. Developing values enable the team to achieve these important steps to success.

Values are the qualities or characteristics that are most important to team members. They are a set of words or phrases developed by team members that identify what is important and guide how to act to achieve the team goals. From past experiences in teaching and coaching it is essential that team values are not imposed on team members. If values are imposed it is common for them to be easily forgotten, the participants do not own the values and are less likely to adhere to them. Goldsmith, 2009, supports this by suggesting that values, being an essential part of a winning culture, need to be developed from within. This allows the team members to own the values and therefore they are more likely to stick to them. Delmas (2009) agrees by identifying an effective team as a group of people who have the same values, developed by themselves, and are working towards fulfilling a common goal.

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To develop team values every member of the team should discuss one or more values that are important to them. To enable this to occur coaches or leaders can promote discussion by asking questions such as “in regard to being a part of this team what is important for you?” or “what would you like to get out of this season?” This process is best done initially in small groups (positional groups work best) as this will not allow anyone to be missed or hide within the larger group environment. Values are then collated and brought to the whole group for discussion. Some values will (hopefully) overlap, which will help the team recognise similarities between individuals with regard to what they want to get out of the season. The whole team can also brainstorm ways in which they can demonstrate that value throughout the duration of the season. The team will then end up with a broad list of values, some may have similar meanings and be combined into one. The team then can collectively adopt a set of key values that they wish to uphold for the upcoming season.

To ensure that these values are not forgotten acronyms can be used. This can be developed by the team with management input. This process of looking at the inventory of words and developing an acronym that encompasses the core values in itself it is an activity that can be enjoyable and promote team unity.

Examples of acronyms developed at the end of the team values development process for two different organisations are below:

The 2010 Wollongong Vikings Rugby Club was setting procedures in place to try and secure the clubs future after poor performances throughout previous seasons. In the past, values had been discussed with senior players and leadership groups but imposed onto the other players. After the above process, the 2010 team came up with the acronym CARL

- C **Culture** – The group thought that improving the culture within the club was the most essential value to be upheld. Looking part of the club (apparel) being at training and games on time,
- A **Accountability** – being accountable for your own actions – no excuses
- R **Respect** – Respect for team mates, respect for referees and respect for the opposition
- L **Legacy** – Create a legacy this year that will enable the success to be continued on

In 2009 the NSW Country Cockatoo’s core values developed by the players were represented by ASERT – as described below

- A **Achieve** – to finish the 2009 season with a sense of achievement
- S **Support** – for each other on and off the field,
- E **Enjoyment** – Enjoy the time spent together as a team
- R **Respect** – Respect for the history of Country rugby, respect for team mates, respect for the opposition

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T **Trust** – trust in each other

Throughout future team meetings or during breaks at training players can be quizzed in regards to the acronym to ensure players are reflecting back to the core values. Another way to reinforce the values is by placing the acronym into team documents as a footnote, headers or even as a watermark.

Create an environment of trust

Building an environment of trust is another important aspect of creating a positive team environment. The Australian Sports Commission (2008) suggests that positive relationships are built on mutual respect and trust. Trust is about doing what you say you are going to do and being who you say you are. Even when dealing with uncomfortable situations, if you are honest and up front it will make things easier for everyone. Dirks (2000, p1009) states that trust “.... allows the team members to suspend their questions, doubts and personal motives and instead throw themselves into working toward team goals.” Although there are many avenues in which one can develop and maintain trust within rugby, one of the most confronting issues that places a strain on the coach/player relationship is the selection process. By establishing a selection policy and procedure to identify what happens when players return from injury or representative duties and sticking to it can help with promoting the up front and honest approach.

Promote and support Leadership Groups

Leadership groups play an important role in creating a positive environment and developing trust. Sargent (2005) suggests effective leaders need to delegate power and responsibility to avoid relying on a single person and effectively stifling member contribution. Team members can elect players who they would like to represent them to ensure the views of everyone are listened to and brought to the attention of management if the need arises. The leadership group needs to be empowered to make decisions, implement team rules and administer consequences of breaches in the teams standards. Some coaches ‘talk the talk’ about empowerment, engagement and players owning decisions but when push comes to shove, they take the power off the leadership group. Giving a leadership group limited power to make decisions then taking it off them as soon as the team is under pressure denies the group any sense of responsibility — it is a leadership group in name only (Goldsmith, 2010).

Develop a sense of history

History is important to people, giving them a sense of identity and belonging. Within rugby this can help create a positive environment. Bringing past players/coaches to talk to teams before games, present jerseys and interact with players will enable the current crop of

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players to respect the history and tradition of the club, respect and remember the great performances of teams of the past, but will also enable the team to strive to progress and improve on them (Goldsmith, 2009).

Develop a sense of community

Developing a sense of community within the club can ensure individuals feel supported and connected, something all individuals look for in their lives. One of our basic human needs is to feel we belong to something bigger than ourselves, and within rugby this can be supported by just being part of a club. Clubs providing individuals with support in finding work, support with educational needs or accommodation are developing a sense of community and ultimately developing a positive environment.

Foster Family involvement

In creating a positive environment within a club and broadening the community base discussed above it is essential wives, girlfriends and partners also feel part of the club. Family BBQ's, partners evening (dinners) and yoga sessions for partners are some ways in which the club can actively support their involvement.

Promote community service

What better way to ensure that players are not taking their luxury of being able to play sport for granted is there than by them being directly involved with individuals who cannot participate for one reason or another. By the club actively promoting community service work, there are obvious benefits in how the club is viewed within the local community, but also provide individual players with a humbling experience and an increased self-worth.

Simple ways to do this are by having fundraising activities for special groups on game days where money is raised and donated to a specific charity. For example, the Wollongong Vikings Rugby Club raised money for male cancer awareness through their support of the Call to Arms initiative set up by the Cancer Council. The club wore yellow socks for the day (purchased by the players) and all proceeds from the day were donated to this initiative.

Other activities, although more time consuming, can include; going to donate blood as a club (an initiative currently supported by Illawarra District Rugby Union), helping out with food kitchens, clothing drives for the homeless and helping out with sporting groups for the disabled.

Continual Skill Appreciation

Another exercise you can do with your players to increase their appreciation of each other, increase self-esteem and help maintain a positive environment is through skill appreciation. This allows team members to recognise and appreciate each other for the unique skills each player brings to the team. This can be done in numerous ways. An example is:

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- Sitting around a table players each write their name, identify two strengths and two areas that need improving
- the card then gets passed around the table with each player adding to the strengths
- Once the card has gone around the table, the player should have some feedback from their peers on their strengths and weaknesses

Conclusion

From research and experience it is evident that for teams to become successful on the field, a positive environment off the field must be created. Developing team values, creating an environment of trust, establishing leadership groups, developing a sense of history, developing a sense of community, family involvement, community service and skill appreciation are some ways in which this positive environment can be established. The resulting benefits of unity, enthusiasm and team spirit will help ensure that success is developed and maintained.

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