

Restorative Practices for Coaches to Build Desirable Team Culture

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Most coaches have the ability to form relationships with their players, but they often devote the majority of their time being intentional with their techniques, scheme, scouting, all of which are important. However, they often fail to dedicate time to intentionally build trust and relationships. Coaches may do the annual holiday dinner or the wiffleball game, (both good traditions) but seldom go deeper than that.

By and large every team member needs two things – to be seen and to be understood. With a little knowledge, time and persistence, every coach can use three basic components of restorative practices to accomplish this and build a desirable team culture for everyone.

Affective Language

Affective language is the use of “I” statements to express how you are feeling at the time in order to help others understand your perspective. When others understand your perspective, it helps them understand you better.

For instance, rather than saying “All you guys do is come to practice and mess around,” you could say, “I feel disrespected when we work to make a meaningful practice plan, but you guys don’t pay attention or give an equal effort.” That might not be the first instinct as coaches, but if you are serious about building relationships, everyone needs to understand the other person’s perspective.

It’s also not natural for coaches to show vulnerability, but if you are truly the leader of the team, your athletes know this and will respect your willingness to share. It takes some time to develop good affective statements, but with a little thought, statements like “I get upset...”, “I feel disappointed...”, “I am so proud...”, “I appreciate when...” will make an impact on your team members.

Fair Process

Fair process is an often-overlooked component of positive environments, but it has a huge impact on how team members view leadership. Fair process has three components: engagement, explanation and expectations.

Fair process begins when leaders first engage team members by soliciting their input. This is not a democracy or even a consensus, but rather an exercise in listening and sharing. As the leader, once you’ve made a decision, it is important to explain how you came to the decision. People are much more likely to comply and contribute positively to a cause when they know they’ve been heard, even if they disagree with the decision.

Lastly, it's important for the leader to communicate the expectations for each team member moving forward. This demonstrates commitment and gives members the structure to meet goals.

When leaders follow "fair process," they build trust, increase cooperation, encourage participation, allow for the sharing of ideas, and (possibly most importantly) motivate individuals to go beyond the call of duty... give the exceptional effort. Exceptional effort is often inspired by mindful leaders who intentionally demonstrate trust and value in all team members.

Circle Work

There is something about being in a circle, facing each other, with no barriers, no phones, no desks, etc. that brings everyone to the same level – coaches included. When people are in a circle, they have the opportunity to see everyone's body language, see their facial expressions, and look them in the eyes. They too see those same things in you, which instantly holds everyone more accountable.

The rules of the circle are simple: only one person is talking at a time, speaking from the heart, sharing only what he or she is comfortable sharing. Listening to understand, not just to respond, participants can "pass" if they would like, and what is said in the circle stays in the circle.

Circles can be used for many different reasons such as introductions, wellness checks, community building, problem-solving, norm/goal setting, instructional, etc. The purpose of the circle should be communicated clearly to team members, and the questions should be intentional and specific to help eliminate possible confusion and to keep the participants moving forward.

Circles typically start with an innocuous question, but one that helps the facilitator gauge where the group is presently. For example, "On a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being not so good and 5 being great, how are you feeling about heading into today's practice?" A follow-up question could be, "For those of you who said 4 or 5, would anyone like to share why you said 4 or 5?" or "For anyone who said 1, 2 or 3, would anyone like to share why you said 1, 2 or 3?"

The facilitator should always follow up input with: "Thank you for sharing," or "That was a thoughtful response" or "I know that wasn't easy, but thank you for being real" or something similar. As the rounds of questions progress, the facilitator can dig a little deeper, though it takes time to build the trust needed for individuals to feel safe sharing. Keep in mind, with each question and each circle, not only are you learning about your team members, they are learning about you and their teammates.

When you begin to focus on building trust and relationships intentionally, think of the team and program you are trying to build. What do you want them to remember about you? As you work through this process with your team, you are not only building a close-knit and trusting team, you are intentionally creating an environment where every individual is being seen and understood. These are the teams that play for you, the teams that play for each other.

If you're interested in learning more about how restorative practices can benefit your teams, contact the International Institute of Restorative Practices (IIRP) or a provider near you.