

Team Cohesion

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Team-Building Activities

Team-building activities have great value, and although some may seem elementary, they bring out the kid in all of us. Anything dealing with food is always fun. Dinners and trips for ice cream are part of many of our team meetings. Other fun activities include a rope-climbing or trust course, camping, or a trip to the beach or movies. Each coach needs to determine how much time her players are capable of investing. For example, scheduling a time-consuming activity during the week prior to final exams would not be good planning, yet a quick dinner at a coach's house might relieve stress while providing a chance for the team to spend some off-the-field time together.

Because I coach two different sports, I have different time tables for getting the teams ready. In lacrosse I can ease my way into the season because we have a fall off-season and a couple of months in the spring before our first game. But during the fall in field hockey, we have only about 10 days to get the team ready to play its first game. Because everything happens so fast, I try to plan out a few activities with the team's seniors while we conduct preseason camp. We schedule only a few things at that time, usually team dinners (during which I try to filter myself around to the players as much as I can) because the team's focus is on preparing for the first game. I have learned never to assume that upperclassmen, especially the seniors, know how to lead. Some are naturals, others need a guide. At the beginning of the season, I speak with the seniors quite often to make sure they are initiating the team bonding.

In the spring, during the lacrosse season, we have more time to spend together prior to the first game. Fall ball practice, team workouts, individual workouts, and two months of practice help a team bond and offer many opportunities to reach out to each other. The seniors tend to guide the team early since they do not have to focus on preparing for the first game. Team dinners, formals (all of the college's athletes plan this in the winter), and the spring-break trip are a few of the things we do.

We have traditions in our program that were started by my college coach. Before every game for the past 27 years, in both programs, a player has done the Psych. The Psych may be a poem, a homemade gift for each player, or thoughts that the player shares, but games are never without one. The captains put together the Psych schedule at the beginning of the season so that each player knows when it is her turn. Two members are usually paired together. The Psych gives everyone a chance to share or do something special for the others. It draws the team around two different people for each game, helps the players get to know each other, and distributes the responsibility of getting the team ready for a game. It is a great tradition.

We also have a buddy system for two portions of the season. The first is during our spring break trip, which kicks off our lacrosse season. The players are paired up for the week, I tell them that even though everyone should be helping to take care of everyone else, their buddy is someone special to watch out for during the trip. Long trips can be great bonding

experiences, but they can also be difficult for some players. I want the players to feel comfortable with each other, and they will become increasingly so if they care about the result of their season. Once we get to postseason play, each player has a secret buddy for whom they make gifts, write notes, and leave little surprises. It seems so simple, but it is the little things in life that count. They learn who their buddies will be prior to the weekend of the national championship.

Because food is a great bonding tool, the players sometimes organize a pasta party to which they invite the assistant coaches, my children, and me. It is a chance for them to share some responsibility for entertaining their teammates. I am planning to invite each class of students over to my house for a meal during the season, starting with the seniors. I feel this will help me stay connected with the players. Early in my career, when I had no children, I spent more time in my office and the athletes would often drop by after practice and throughout the evening, making it easier to get to know them. These meals will present another way for me to bond with them, and it will help the players recognize my interest in them. This acknowledgement will strengthen my bond with them, which will enhance the overall cohesion of the team.

Also, as I have gotten older, I have realized something that sounds obvious but as a younger coach did not occur to me. As time moves on, we coaches get older and our lives change, yet the age of our athletes stays the same. Before having children of my own this didn't affect my relationships with our players since I often spent extra hours in my office. This was a time when the players and I always had ample opportunities to bond. However, after having children I significantly reduced the amount of extra hours I spent in the office. It was then that I realized I needed to make more of an effort to bond with the players during the time I had with them.

Most of the teams I have coached have been very close-knit, because that is a huge priority for me. I might tell the players to take a teammate they do not spend much time with to dinner. If I see cliques beginning to form, I make sure everyone understands that kind of behavior is not acceptable on my teams. Because this is made clear to everyone, we rarely have further problems with the issue. We go bowling periodically, and I know of teams that spend an afternoon playing paintball or going rock climbing. Any activity, no matter how big or small, that allows the players to interact outside of their sport can improve the chemistry of the team.

