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When (Key) Players Clash: Turning Conflict into Strength

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Your team is only as strong as its weakest relationship.

Judas deceived Jesus. John chose Yoko over Paul, George, and Ringo. Shaq couldn't stand Kobe. Steve Jobs was fired by John Scully, his hand-picked CEO. Aristotle rejected Plato's theory of forms. Both the West Coast rapper Tupac and the East Coast legend The Notorious B.I.G. were killed as a part of a hip-hop rivalry. And Carl Jung drifted far from Freud, his close friend and mentor. Relationships between people of high status often prove challenging. It not need be this way.

Have you ever been on a team where the players can't get along? How about having coached such a team? Maybe it's simply a matter of personalities. Or the circumstances, such as a losing streak, overpower the desire to get along with one another. Conflicts easily erupt when team

relations become dysfunctional. Yet, many coaches I've witnessed seem to think everyone will get along because they are forever preaching teamwork. This is not so.

The Facts of Life

Your team is only as strong as its weakest relationship. Yes, I know that's a strong statement, so let me say it again. Every team is only as strong as its weakest relationships; and great teams—players and coaches—never assume everyone will get along. Oh, almost every coach says they spend enough time on relationship building. Yet when I've asked coaches to journal their activities, slowly but surely team building and internal (player) leadership take a back seat to the tasks "necessary" to practice and master the game plan.

Two Sides to Every Story

In an effort to be transparent, let us agree that we like to think of ourselves as being reasonable, mostly right, and when in some level of conflict we often make negative attributions about the other person's intentions. Indeed, in the privacy of our own minds, we hold, with white knuckles, our position with a high degree of confidence and certainty. We must be right, we reason. The problem is, the other person we are engaged in conflict with is holding tightly to their "reasonableness" too.

Thus a dance of defensive routines emerges. Each participant—combatant to be sure—thinks that their conclusion is factual, that their view is complete (rather than partial), and the other person is the problem.

The result: conflict. The condition of the team changes at that moment. The one-sided nature of each player's perspective can, and often does, set in motion a roller-coaster of irrationality which invariably will snare more players into its trap.

Nip this in the Bud

You know that to solve a conflict requires slowing things down. It's crucial to find out how we got from "there" to "here." But the game plan doesn't allow for this, "We must continue to move forward" you're likely to think, say—and do. While you might get back on track, this is why and how things get swept under the carpet. You know relational issues will catch up with you, but you think if you run fast enough you might out-run the fall-out. The questionable news is, you just might get away with nipping the problem in the bud. But it will get you. It's just a matter of time.

The Vulnerability of Relational Blindness

Several years ago I worked with a successful high school basketball team. After a deep run in the playoffs the team wanted to understand how to get over the hurdle and get to the proverbial "next level."

During a leadership training exercise a senior-to-be, a starter and major contributor, broke down and apologized to his teammates. He acknowledged the team's loss should be attributed to him. As the team's point guard, with the clock running and down by one point in the state semi-final game, he had the ball in his hand and an opportunity to pass to either of two open teammates. One teammate was not a scorer (1.5 ppg), while the other was the team's leading scorer (19.0 ppg) and best shooter. Down by two, he crosses half court and sees the two teammates open in each corner. He had a choice. And he knew the team's best option. So do you. He passed it to the non-scorer, coincidentally his best friend, who put up a shot with time expiring. Air ball.

The caring young man, in his desire to be transparent, admitted that personal bias led to the sub-optimal choice of shooters. He said it was rooted in a fight he had with the leading scorer around mid-season. And after the fight was broken up by teammates, he willingly "recruited" the underclass team members to "side" with him. They did. And in effect they split the locker room into upperclass vs. underclass; seniors against the juniors. No coach witnessed the fight, never heard that it happened, and the coaching staff was completely unaware that the locker room split. The players, in a twisted show of team work, hid the division—the fault line—that ultimately cost the team a shot at the State Championship.

Any time you talk about relationships it's easy to gloss over the fact that people create and sustain them. People matter. Relationships matter. Student-athletes make a wide range of choices that affect relations, mostly unconscious as in the incident mentioned above. Importantly, it's utter folly to think that you, or any coach, will know all that goes on with team member interpersonal interactions. This, of course, is a reason for team leaders—you

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need your players to engage in detecting and correcting problems encountered as they build the team.

Over the course of a season incidents like this pile up and drag down practices, film study, and in-game behavior. Don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting coaches are blind to such deviant behavior. What I do know though is that when the choice for spending time is either better spent on direct team building or the game plan; it is the relationship side of things that usually falls by the way side. Relationship building is sorely neglected during the course of a season.

Hit the "Pause" Button: Rebuilding Trust

The good news is that when conflicts and dysfunction rear their ugly heads, you can, and should, turn them into team building teachable events.

When two players (or more) clash, you need not throw your hands up and declare the issue unsolvable. Actually, this is the moment to explore the "honesty" in perspectives. Most coaches ignore this moment. It stresses them out. But if you're willing to, you can use the "argument" to strengthen the relationship.

In the dictionary, the antonym of honesty is lying. Thus a participant in any conflict is going to protect himself. In most cases differences of opinion arise out of one's desire to feel respected, appreciated, and needed. And the opposite of arguing is agreement. The curious thing is that the conflict participants are, for the most part, seeking agreement—however one-sided it is to begin with.

You can capitalize on this moment of truth by harnessing honesty and agreement.

Your task, and goal, is to turn the adversarial relationship into one in alignment with the

team's mission. Now is the time to hit the pause button—literally.

Give the participants their own quiet space in which to reflect and respond to the following questions.

- What is the outcome I want here?
- Do I want a relationship with this person?
- What is the outcome our teammates want?
- What goals do we share?
- How do I want this to end?

These reflective questions help the student-athlete learn to see themselves as architects of their own experience. They determine the need and desire to shift to acting on the end they want and the future they're trying to achieve.

During the course of a season the absence of interpersonal conflict is unlikely. Conflict is natural. What you do with conflict will have much to do with the growth, or stunting the growth, of your team building efforts. ★

The Academy for Sport Leadership's Coaching for Leadership Approach

Our approach to team building is rooted in the belief that leadership is a powerful force for shaping a team's culture, influencing the growth and development of student-athletes, and those coaches that practice deep leadership stand above and apart from others in the profession.



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