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Chapter 6
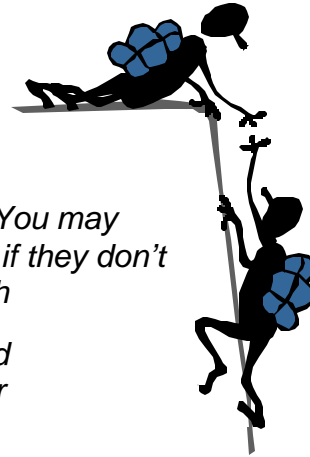# Team Building
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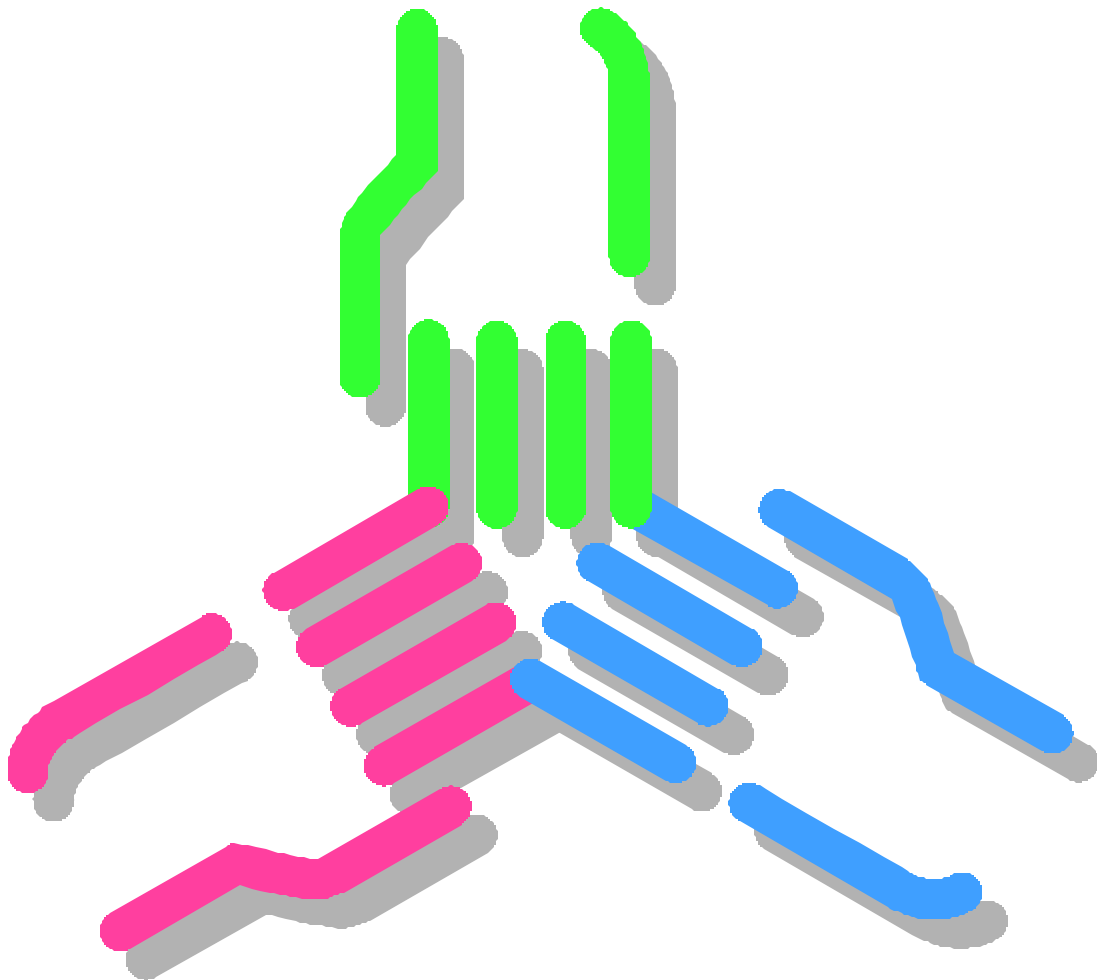
TEAM BUILDING & TEAM COHESION

"The main ingredient of stardom is the rest of the team"
-John Wooden

"The way a team plays as a whole determines its success. You may have the greatest bunch of individual stars in the world, but if they don't play together, the club won't be worth a dime." —Babe Ruth

"Not all are blessed with great ability, but with teamwork and perseverance, all can accomplish great things." -M.D. Boyer

Why Team Building in an Individual Sport?

Take a pencil and piece of paper and write a list of why you like swimming or ask your swimmers to list why they like swimming. Your list may look something like this:

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1. It's fun.
2. I like being in shape.
3. I like being with my friends and
   teammates.
4. Competition is fun.
5. I want to swim faster.
6. Great way to make new friends.
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Somewhere on most swimmer's list is "I like being with my friends and teammates." When sport psychologists study reasons for participation usually one of the top reasons is social in nature such as "To be with friends." Although swimming is primarily an individual sport, the athlete and the clock, interactions in practice and at competitions, with teammates and competitors, helps to shape the overall swimming experience. A positive environment with coaches and athletes supporting each other can lead to great individual success.

This chapter will focus on several aspects of teams. First, we'll look at how a group becomes a team, the process that takes place and how to assess where a team is in this process. Second, we will discuss specific characteristics of successful teams. In doing so, for each characteristic, we will provide a description and explanation of the characteristic, an example related to swimming, and strategies for coaches developing these characteristics in their team. Finally, we will provide exercises to be used to facilitate individual swimmers becoming a team.

How Do Individuals Become a Team?

Group development generally follows a specific process. The most common model for explaining how individuals form as a group was

developed by Tuckman (1965). This model suggests that when developing into a group, individuals go through 4 distinct stages: Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing. While the progression from one stage to another may be perceived as linear, in many cases teams can waiver back and forth between stages before actually progressing on to the next stage. Let's look at each of these stages and apply them to swimming.

Forming. During the forming stage the team members usually come together for the first time for the season. This is a learning period for old and new members, acquainting and reacquainting themselves with how the group functions, their roles within the group and the group goals. In order to facilitate this stage, coaches often set up time outside of practice for social activities such as movies, picnics, and outings to other sporting events to allow the group to get to know each other better. This is also the time when coaches go over team rules, responsibilities, and roles within the team.

Swimming: On swim teams, it is common for coaches to provide each athlete with a Team Manual that outlines expectations and procedures. Additionally, activities such as participating in a ropes course or hosting a pizza party are typical early-season functions. All of these strategies serve to facilitate the forming of a team.

Storming. The storming phase usually occurs a few weeks into the season. The honeymoon period is over and now it's time to get down to work. This phase is characterized by conflict over who has control and infighting for status positions and the coach's attention. It is during the storming phase that those athletes with a poor work ethic and/or bad attitude emerge; personality and goal conflict among team members also becomes apparent. While it seems like a counterproductive stage, keep in mind that *THE STORMING PHASE IS INEVITABLE AND IF CHANNELED CORRECTLY CAN LEAD TO EFFECTIVE TEAM BUILDING.* Coach's need to be vigilant in identifying conflicts when they emerge and open up communication paths to resolve the conflict in a timely fashion. Successful resolution can lead to increases in team members self-esteem, respect for their teammates similarities and differences, overall trust, and communication skill effectiveness.

Swimming: An example of storming on a swim team is when Ingrid, a new swimmer, joins the program and immediately moves to the front of the lane. Leigh, who led her lane all last season becomes frustrated and her attitude begins to affect the atmosphere in the lane. Covert infighting is bound to happen as Leigh struggles to retain her status and control the lane. If approached carefully, this presents a perfect opportunity to teach Leigh and Ingrid life skills and help them to develop more effective goals together.

Norming. The calm after the storm. Norming is the period after storming where the team has come to a consensus about what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. Goals, objectives and expectations have been clearly defined by the coach and the athletes. The respect they gain for their teammates unique

contribution to the team is the most important realization the athletes come to during the norming phase.

Swimming: During the norming phase Leigh gains respect for Ingrid's abilities and now realizes that Ingrid helps push her in practice, which will only make her a better swimmer.

Performing.   The performing stage is similar to the peak at the end of the season. During this stage, there is a close bond among the group members and a general want for one another to succeed. The team members begin to truly value each individual's contribution and the relationships are secure within the team. The group is finally acting as a confident cohesive unit.   In this final stage, the team should be able to combine effort towards the group goals.

Swimming: We often see the performing stage in action at Regional or National level competitions. A team goal may be to have 75% of the athletes' swim a personal best. In support of this goal, whenever a team member is on the blocks the team supports him with a cheer. What a great motivation to swim fast.

Having an awareness of the 4-stage process of becoming a team can be helpful in several ways.   First, it provides a structure to what has probably been witnessed on the pool deck. Observed behaviors and relationships can now be placed into a defined context. Second, by understanding each of the stages, proactive steps can be taken to facilitate the successful progression through each of the stages, to promote successful team formation.

Characteristics of Successful Teams.

 To enhance coach effectiveness, one strategy used is to identify characteristics of successful coaches and try to develop these characteristics in other coaches. We can take a similar approach when trying to understand and enhance team effectiveness. First, we need to identify the characteristics of successful teams.   While teams are successful for a multitude of reasons, six characteristics deserve special attention. Specifically, successful teams usually have clear goals, a high degree of commitment from their team members, clear roles for each team member, a great amount of respect for each other, pathways for open communication and consistent coaching.   Each of these six factors will be discussed in detail. After each description, exercises will be provided to be used to develop the given characteristic in swim teams. Note that many of these traits that make teams successful can be developed as a team progresses through the four stages of forming a team.

CLEAR GOALS
The first characteristic of successful teams is clear goals. Effective goal setting for individual athletes was discussed in detail in the first chapter of this Mental Toolbox. It may be beneficial to review this chapter because when setting team

goals many of the same principles still apply - be specific, use long term and short term goals, set task and outcome goals and be flexible and realistic. However, setting team goals is sometimes more challenging because the whole team has to agree on where they are going and how they are going to get there. The goal setting process is often facilitated by asking the team at the beginning of the season "What <u>can</u> you as a group achieve?" and "What do you as a group <u>want</u> to achieve?" This process gets the team thinking about the realm of possibilities as well as their motivation and commitment to the goal.

End of the Banquet Exercise

An exercise to facilitate team goal setting is to have your team split up into small groups and ask them to identify how they would like to be remembered at the end of the year banquet. Ask each group to report to the other groups how they think the team should be remembered at the end of the season. This exercise will serve as a way to start discussions about the group goal (where they want to be) and mission.

Mission Statement

Once the group has brain stormed about the where they want to be at the end of the season, have them formalize their goals into a mission statement. A mission statement is a way to clarify team dreams into team goals. Remember that for the goal to be effective it must be specific; ideally, the mission statement will give purpose and direction to the season. Once created, the team should post the mission statement either in the pool or in the locker room as a daily reminder of where they want to go.

COMMITMENT

Involving the team in the creation of the team goals and mission process is the first step to gaining their commitment as it leads to increased motivation as well as feelings of ownership and accountability. If the swimmers are not involved and don't feel like their input is valued it is very likely that they won't feel a level of commitment. Commitment is best viewed on a continuum with commitment level fluctuating throughout the season. It is when commitment is at the extremes that one should be concerned. In his book Championship Team Building, Jeff Janssen (1999) suggests that there are eight defined stages in commitment. Can you identify yourself or any of your athletes on this continuum?

- *Resistant* – Someone who has not bought into the team goal, they are working on their own agenda and are usually very selfish.
- *Reluctant* – This person is hesitant, disinterested and afraid to commit to the team goal, they usually do just enough to get by.
- *Existent* – To this person the team goal has little significance, they are just swimming because all their friends swim or their parents make them.
- *Compliant* – The team goal is important to this type of athlete, however they do just enough to get by, no more and no less.

- *Committed* - This type of athlete views the team goal as very important. They will do anything they can to achieve it such as putting in extra time and energy.
- *Compelled* – To this athlete the team goal is of utmost importance, they are totally invested in it and it becomes their true mission. These athletes thoroughly enjoy the extra time they put in.
- *Apathetic* – Someone who doesn't care and has lost all their love for the sport.
- *Obsessed* – To this person the goal is the only focus, they partake in extreme behaviors such as overtraining.

A successful team is made up of a balance of compliant, committed and compelled individuals. Given this, a challenge for coaches is to identify the commitment levels on your team and strategies to effectively coach each type of athlete and possibly influence their commitment level.

Influencing Commitment
It is often the less committed athletes that are the most challenging (those further down the continuum than compliant). In order to reach these athletes, challenge them to make the commitment by emphasizing their responsibility to the team. It is often productive to have each athlete tell the group what he/she is going to do to help the team achieve its goal. Another strategy is to have a one on one talk with her to understand why she isn't making the commitment (or is afraid to make the commitment).

Team Practice
Once a month, assign several of your swimmers to design a practice. By doing so you are in essence saying that their input counts. Often when the athletes are allowed to design and execute their practice they are very likely to work harder because they truly enjoy the practice they have developed for themselves.

SPECIFIC ROLES
In each team, team members take on certain valuable roles whether it be team leader, counselor, social director, motivator or team clown.

- *Team Leader* – the athletes who through their actions both physically and verbally set the tone for the season.
- *Counselors* – the athletes who help struggling team members and often play peacemaker in times of dissention.
- *Social Directors* – the athletes who are always planning ways to get together outside of swimming so the team can get to know each other better.
- *Motivators* – highly spirited athletes who can get the team up with their behaviors and motivational talks.
- *Team Clowns* – these athletes lend some of their sense of humor to the sport situation, tend to help make practice and competitions fun for all.

The key to becoming a successful team is getting each team member to accept their role as well as see value in the other roles both in and out of the pool.

Understanding Roles

This exercise is designed to help your athletes understand each others roles. All you need is a ball of string or a skein of yarn. Have your team sit in a circle facing each other. The first swimmer takes the ball of string or yarn and tosses it to a teammate (anywhere in the circle). The first swimmer then talks about the things the team needs from the teammate with the ball of string in order to be successful. The second swimmer then repeats the process by tossing the string to another swimmer and talking about the things the team needs from that teammate in order to be successful.

After each team member has been talked about and has had a chance to speak and each swimmer is holding a piece of the string begin a discussion about what the exercise means to the team. More than likely they will talk about how each member of the team is dependent on the other. To further the discussion get them to think about what would happen if one member of the team let go of the string.

RESPECT

It is important for a team to understand and accept that not every one is going to be best friends. While friendship among team members isn't a critical element of successful team, respect is. When talking to your team about respect, remind them that they can earn respect of their teammates through the actions and attitudes they display daily in and out of practice.

Identify noteworthy behaviors

Every Friday, ask one athlete to select a teammate who has consistently demonstrated exemplary behavior in practice. Ask the individual to give a specific example of something this athlete did and how it impacted the team. Such an exercise can illuminate positive behaviors and facilitate mutual respect.

OPEN COMMUNICATION

Communication comes in many different forms and at many different levels. Coach-athlete and athlete-athlete communication should be open. That is, coaches and athletes are encouraged to honestly express themselves about team standards, individual and team goals, feelings and expectations. Remember to keep an open door policy when communicating with your athletes as well as to check in with your athletes from time to time to see how they are doing and feeling. Encourage your athletes to communicate both compliments and complaints

Effective communication involves both the sending and receiving of messages. Let's review a few basic criteria to keep in mind when communicating. The following are several guidelines when sending messages (Janssen, 1999).

- Be Direct – Speak directly to the person you would like to talk to.

- Be Complete and Specific.
- Be Consistent.
- Communicate your needs and feelings.
- Be Concise and Focused.

In sports, an important aspect of sending messages relates to giving feedback. Janssen (1999) sets out six guide lines for giving feedback.

1. Be Positive – Your athletes will respond better to the feed back if it is stated in a positive manner.
2. Be Specific – Let your athletes know what he or she did well or exactly what he or she needs to improve.
3. Give the Feedback Immediately After the Performance – Doing this will reinforce the good behavior and help to change the undesirable behavior.
4. Be Sincere and Honest.
5. Give Feedback Less Often When Skills Are Learned – This tends to build confidence in the athletes.
6. Focus on Effort as Well as Result – Not every one in the pool can win the race so structure feedback so that it reflects each individuals performance, not their performance as related to other swimmers.

In addition, when correcting mistakes as a part of feedback, use the "sandwich technique" – meaning try to sandwich the critique between two positive comments. Start by relaying a positive comment, follow that by a correction (what they should do) and end with encouragement and hope. For example, Kaitlin, you really had a fast start you were the first one in the water, remember to hold your streamline off of your start, with a little extra work in practice on streamlines off your walls you should get it.

As mentioned, effective communication involves two components: sending and receiving information. Receiving information requires the skill of listening. You may be the best communicator on your team, however if your team members are not listening this will get you no where. Listening shows that you care about what your teammates and team members are saying and that what they are saying is important to building a successful team.

Telephone Game
This childhood game is a quick and easy way to demonstrate the importance of good communication skills and good listening skills. Have your team sit in a circle. Write out a scenario similar to the one provided here on a sheet of paper, give the first person in the telephone chain about 45 seconds to read and understand the scenario before having them pass it on by whispering in it in the persons ear directly to their right. Once the message has passed all the way around the circle have the last person report what they heard.

Often by the time the message reaches the last person it is quite jumbled and different from the initial scenario. Talk to your team about good communication skills and good listening skills. Also point out that a jumbled message can often

be the result of gossip traveling on the team, by the time it gets to the last person it can be very distorted.

Scenario: Harry, Julia, Bob and Alice all signed up for dance lessons. While Julia and Bob liked learning the tango best, Tom and Alice were keen on the waltz. Until one lesson when the dance instructor realized that Tom had two left feet. Immediately he went to the hospital and had a right foot transplant. Now Tom and Alice are back on the dance floor cutting up a rug.

CONSISTENT COACHING

Coaches serve an important role in bringing the team together. Often without the guidance and support of the coach the team doesn't have a chance at being successful. There are three major factors that make up consistent coaching; they include fairness, dedicated staff and consistency.

Fairness

In order to promote cohesiveness, commitment, and satisfaction within the team, the coach needs to demonstrate fairness in his/her coaching style and decisions. Fairness can be demonstrated by:

- Making a conscious effort to ensure that coach perceptions of athletes are not having a negative impact on interactions with the athlete. For example, Jason's brother was a deterrent and disruption to the team. Jason has just started with the program. How is he treated?
- Being aware of attention and interest that is paid to different athletes. Find positives things each athlete is doing and help each athlete improve their skills.
- Keeping lines of communication open. This will aid in the perception of fairness on the pool deck.

Dedicated Staff

Know your stuff. Coaching takes up a lot of time, but most people are in the profession because they love it. Continue to show your athletes your dedication in the way you walk, talk and act on deck. They will be will more likely to buy into what you are saying if they understand your commitment to them.

Consistency

Coaches who change their minds at the drop of a hat do not gain the respect needed to create a cohesive team. They end up confusing their team instead of leading their team to great accomplishments. Coaches who have repeated success are consistent in their philosophies and standards. We are not suggesting that you should never make improvements to your philosophy or standards, however the most successful teams know what their coach's expect of them in every practice and race.

How to Use This Information.

To begin incorporating these characteristics into your team, the first step is to assess the current status of your team. You may find that they already possess

three of these characteristics. Next, identify the characteristics that would be beneficial to try to instill within your program. Prioritize - - don't try to do it all now. Then, develop a plan. How will respect be breed amongst athletes and coaches? Or, how can you monitor the "fairness" displayed by the coaching staff? As with anything that is of value, it doesn't come easily. Hard work and commitment to change are critical.