Beyond Skill

“I won’t accept anything less than the best a player’s capable of doing, and he has the right to expect the best that I can do for him and the team.”

-Lou Holtz, legendary college football coach

With both high school and college bowling on the rise, developing a quality program is an important topic to address in the pages of BTM. The goal of this article is to improve the likelihood of reflection about holistic team and program development as well as to discuss the larger macro issues of a program structure.

Like any great sport team, the structure of a quality program is much more than simply skill building in the sport. In bowling, teams would benefit greatly by building around culture, expectations and daily habits. The attention to these details builds the self-discipline, mental toughness and quality focus required to reach a full attention of a team. But, a coach must embed culture and expectations into a daily practice routine in addition to the promotion of skills and knowledge. Culture, expectations, knowledge, data, evaluation and the daily practice process are important elements of great program design.

Culture

“Individual commitment to a group effort - that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work.”

-Vince Lombardi

I get many requests from coaches, from around the world, to discuss the structure of their team’s training program. Nearly all of these coaches discuss the technical bowling elements in detail to some degree. Yet, unfortunately, they often fail to see the importance of culture as the underlying foundation for a great program.

Joe Slowinski, a Top 100 coach, is a full time coach at the Kegel Training Center and the Head Coach of the Webber International University bowling program. The Portland Maine native is the former Director of Coaching and Coach Certification for the National Sports Council of Malaysia. Visit his coaching site at www.bowlingknowledge.info and send him questions at joe.slowinski@kegel.net
Like football, there is much more to the sport and team success than Xs and Os. Team culture is the foundation of a team that achieves more or less. A great team will address and focus on team culture while an underperforming team will not even be aware of the importance of team culture.

The culture of a team defines the day-to-day routines as well as what is expected from each member of the team community. A coach must define specifically what is acceptable in regards to behavior, attitudes and work ethic. Culture is literally the core of greatness or mediocrity. Great teams start with a shared culture of excellence. All actions are measured to a pre-established level of excellence. And, a culture-centered coach will literally, figuratively and symbolically focus on culture on a daily basis. These coaches have a well-defined model and articulate this frequently to players.

Coaches, who want to improve a program, should start with culture to define the scaffold on which to build the program. And, a culture-centered coach must reward adherence to the accepted culture while proactively addressing athletes who act in opposition to the culture of the team. This is communicated both literally and figuratively on a daily basis. Symbolic messages are the heart and soul of the team. These are comprised of the daily routines, practices and messages.

Most importantly, if players are behaving in ways opposed to the team culture, these actions and behaviors must be addressed immediately.

**Step # 1: Define the culture you expect with specific actions**

Start with what you would want to see in a team that is excellent. Choose the specific action that match what your vision of excellence is for your team. This starts with the warm-up and cool-down as well. What are the actions of the bowlers that you want to see? What does your warm-up process look like? How do bowlers transition from a warm-up to drills? How do bowlers transition to Baker practice? Inform your players of what they should be doing.

**Step # 2: Define words and symbols that match the culture**

Words and symbols will be used frequently as reminders to the culture. Your team should have a motto that addresses the cultural expectations. And, this motto is stated frequently to remind the players of what is expected. Do you display examples of consistency with the desired culture?

**Expectations**

Expectations are derived from the culture of the team. These expectations, through day-to-day actions, cement the culture in your team. And, these are the behaviors and action that the coach deems as necessary to create the team culture. Specifically, the team expectations are the scaffold of a program. It is the foundation of which all is built around to enable a team culture to be realized. These expectations include behavioral expectations.

As part of the Webber International University program, we have a three-prong motto:
- Be patient and present
- Strive for excellence
- Constant learning

These are the actions in which we expect our bowlers to engage in on and off the lanes. We truly believe that this will lead them to becoming better bowlers and better people.

This is what we refer to as the Webber Way. It appears in writing on team correspondences as well as in

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day-to-day discussions in practice. It is alive because we keep it alive on a daily basis. We demonstrate the importance of doing your best on a daily basis. We value it by keeping it alive. So, the team values it.

Many famous coaches have the exact time for all actions written down. There is no dead time. This provides the players with specific expectations of every single minute of practice.

Step # 3: Formally articulate the expectations of all aspects of team activities

From the first practice, a coach must both articulate the expectations as well as have the team practice these formally. What do these expectations look like? What are examples that are opposed to these expectations? Without specific examples, some of your athletes will not truly know what to do. When the team moves off of expected behavior and actions, the coach needs to remind them. Do not assume. Rather, a coach should provide guidance and show them what you expect.

Knowledge

A great program should have a learning curriculum to improve the bowlers’ knowledge. Moreover, this helps the team have a shared language associated with bowling. This also reinforces the team culture.

For the desired knowledge and skills, think about having a periodic clinic for the bowling team. Whether it is specifics about the physical game or lane play, this will help the bowlers to understand the curriculum content that you have defined as part of the program.

At Webber International University (A four-year, independent, coeducational business institution located in Babson Park, Florida), we have a year-long knowledge curriculum that is shared in a weekly clinic. Each week builds and supports what has been learned previously and the practice on that day is designed to reinforce new learning over multiple lane conditions. Over the course of the year, players are formally assessed with a sit-down written essay exam. Most importantly, the curriculum is designed around what we want our players to know and be able to do in competition. Players also practice these skills on a daily and weekly basis.
**Step # 4: Define what you want the team to know and be able to do**

After defining the skills and knowledge that you want to have your team know as well as the skills to master, think about the progression of skills and knowledge that would lead to the most progress for your team in that season. For a team of beginners, on a high school team, this would look very different than a team of elite college players. Where is your team going to be functioning, at the beginning of the season? Ideally, you want the previous week’s set of skills and knowledge to build into the following weeks. In this next week, the activities will solidify the previous week as well as other things previously.

**Practice what is important**

Practice is where players learn, reinforce and cement the culture and knowledge. A practice process must be holistic in nature and capture the culture, skills and knowledge as well as the reinforcement the expectations of the team.

Practice also includes those behavior and practice expectations that are consistent with the culture.

**Step # 5: Determine a practice process that is aligned with the core knowledge, skill and culture**

Define the specific practice elements that match culture, expectations and knowledge. Start with the macro level. What are the outcomes for the season? When are their important milestones for the team? Work backward from these parts of the season. Then, fit in a week-by-week and day-by-day plan. Try to have each day become a targeted day for a specific part of your program. For example, you could have a structure like the following:

- Day 1 – skill building and individual development
- Day 2 – team bowling and Baker
- Day 3 – spare shooting skills and assessment
- Day 4 – skill games
- Day 5 – team bowling and Baker

**Data**

Information and feedback is important in the pursuit of improvement. And, data is objective and provides evidence for decisions. This is far more than a simple performance average of games bowled. In competition, what is a bowler’s pocket percentage? What is a bowler’s single-pin spare conversion? How proficiently do bowlers fill frames? What spares are left most frequently? And, how proficient is a player in converting these spares?

**Step # 6: Collect data that is meaningful to the program**

Decide what data will help you make decisions about which players will bowl as well as data that will identify areas of strength and weakness. Be sure to communicate this data with the team and the individuals. Be careful to promote improvement rather than embarrassment.

**Evaluation**

Having a constant pulse of your players’ skills and knowledge is essential to meet their needs as individual players as well as the needs of the team.

**Step # 7: What do you want to evaluate and how frequently do you want to evaluate bowlers?**

Begin by developing a plan to evaluate a bowler’s skills, versatility and knowledge? When is it important to know what they know and can do? Clearly, a pre-assessment, at the beginning of the season, is important. What other times of the year do you want to evaluate your players?

**It’s in the details**

Great programs in all sport require attention to detail in all aspects of the team. Greatness is literally in the details. This will determine whether your team reaches its full potential or not.

Team bowling is about a group that makes a team better not a collection of good individuals who bowl as a team. Our sport history is loaded with examples of well coached teams that defeat higher ranked teams with a group of more talented individuals. In these situations, these teams rose above and met their potential when it mattered most. Coaching and a structured team process made the difference.

To get the most out of your team, focus on the details needed to move them from a collection of individuals to a high functioning team.