

Motivating A Mediocre Team:  
Increasing Effort and Interest In Athletes

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### The Problem

While taking over a mediocre basketball team, that had a previous .500 record, we, the coaches, have noticed that our athletes are lacking motivation. With the proper motivation, our athletes would feel empowered and apt to provide an effort that is consistent with our expectations and their abilities. Amotivation, which is often linked to a lack of participation (Mallett, 2005, p. 418), is also a concern for our coaching staff. We understand that some of our athletes only attend classes in order to remain eligible for varsity sports. In analyzing our athletes' behavior and motivational characteristics, we noticed two groups of athletes on the team. The talented athletes are often tardy, lack consistency in consistency, and struggle academically. According to the athletic director, the previous coaches had fixed game-day rosters that rewarded the more talented players. These players were not properly challenged and were permitted to behave in a manner that was inconsistent with team rules. Unfortunately, these players best responded to punitive incentives and fear tactics. The other group of athletes are punctual and diligent in both athletics and academics. However, these athletes receive fewer minutes during games. They sincerely enjoy their inclusion in the school team.

### The Discussion

As the coaches of this basketball team, we want to make sure we can motivate these athletes so that they will all be able to reach their full potential. We know that the coaching style can be adjusted to help motivate the athletes more; motivation is not a "you-have-it-or-don't" (Vealey, 2005, p. 27). In discussing their current motivation, we noted that research has shown that athletes are motivated for three main reasons. These reasons are for the experience or challenge, to belong to a group or team, and to demonstrate success or competence (Vealey, 2005, p. 30). The talented athletes seem to be motivated based on the experience or

challenge. They aren't putting forth the effort because they are not stimulated. There were limited expectations and practices were not challenging. We feel as though they are motivated based upon the challenge and experience of their sport. They are competent central figures on the team who have not demonstrated motivation during practices and in the classroom. They seem to be extrinsically motivated and respond to the use of fear. They may also be additionally motivated by outcome goals, however the poor team win loss record is not enough to keep them motivated. Previously, their lack of effort has not decreased their playing time. As a result, there is no reason to put forth an effort to earn playing time. Thus, the extrinsic reward of playing time is not being appropriately used as they are rewarded regardless of their actions or performance on the court (Vealey, 2005, p. 43).

In contrast, the less talented players seem to be intrinsically motivated. They are consistent in the efforts and demonstrate punctuality. These players have motivation that is probably deeply rooted to their desire to belong on the team. Even though they don't have much playing time, they are mature enough to have accepted their roles on the team while still viewing themselves as a member of the team (Vealey, 2005, p. 31). This is not to say that these players are playing to their potential, as they too are not being fully challenged or being given the opportunity to have meaningful playing time. Without meaningful playing time it is unlikely that these players will experience the same stimulation or educational experience that those playing in games will receive (Kretchmar, 2013, p.125). Ergo, the team is not as successful because these players are not being fully developed. While these athletes are intrinsically motivated, it is only at a very basic level. With more guidance and a different coaching style, we can help move their motivation to an even higher level of intrinsic motivation that will encourage them to explore new skills in the sport (Vealey, 2005, p. 36).

As we have two very different categories of players, we had to take into consideration the needs of all the players to motivate them. It seems as all the players could use extra challenge and stimulation. The team is lacking the overall experience of a sports team since there are cliques within the team instead of a team unity. They also could use a boost of feeling of success. Since their winning percentage is below expectations, all the athletes could use help viewing success as improving their performance in certain areas such as rebounds instead of just winning. These athletes could also benefit from some structure to make sure that they are being appropriately challenged (Vealey, 2005, p. 30).

As the coaches and experts in motivation, we recognize that motivation is an interaction between the personal traits of athletes and the situations put forth for the team (Vealey, 2005, p. 25). In order to match our athletes' personal traits to certain situations we have constructed, we looked at four motivational theories and compared them to decide which theory best fit this team. The four theories were the Flow Theory, the Achievement Theory, the Attribution Theory, and the Self-Determination Theory. We felt that the Flow Theory, which works to have an optimal challenge with well-defined tasks and feedback, would be focused mainly on the motivation of task success. However, not all of our players were motivated by task success. We felt as if this theory would apply more towards the more talented players and would not allow us to create a sense of belonging for the other players. When we looked at the Achievement Theory, which helps teach athletes three different ways to view success: outcome, task, and social goals, we liked that it applied to all levels of motivation for our athletes. But we didn't feel as if our players needed their views of success or failure altered, as much as they needed steps to be taken to meet their motivational needs. The Attribution Theory, which again discusses ways to view success through ability, task, difficulty, and luck, didn't cover the need

for belonging or ways to increase intrinsic motivation. It would work well for the players on the bench to show them that their effort is increasing their success, but we thought the starters would not respond to the ideas. After looking at the Self-Determination Theory, we all felt this was the most all-encompassing theory that met the needs of all our athletes and would set up a very strong sense of team culture. The Self-Determination Theory works on teaching athletes to use their already established motivational needs and altering their acceptance of external motivation towards a more beneficial intrinsic motivation model by developing personal ownership and stimulation (Vealey, 2005, p. 35).

#### The Course of Action

In order to implement the Self-Determination Theory to motivate our athletes, we have decided to use the seven autonomy-supported behaviors for a coach as described in Mallett (2005, p. 420) to help nurture an autonomy-supported environment. The first four of these are to provide structured support, provide rationale, to acknowledge feelings and opinions, and to allow initiative taking (Mallett, 2005, p. 420). We feel it is important to get everyone on board and taking ownership for the team. To do this we would hold a team meeting. First we would want to get everyone's feelings about their past experience with the team, their hopes or goals, and issues they see. This would hopefully provide a team building between all members of the team and begin to break up the clique that has developed. It should also allow everyone to voice their opinions so they can be considered in how we are going to re-organize the team. After everyone has been able to share with the team members, including coaches in order to build trust (Camire et al, 2011, p. 95), we will guide the players in setting team rules and expectations. This would include schedules of practice times, rules for punctuality, maintaining academic standards (a certain GPA) and how playing time is decided. By having the players help come up with these

rules, we are allowing them choice in the matter of their team. They would not have full control of the rules, but giving them decisions will allow them to have some control and take responsibility for team performance (Vealey, 2005, p. 39). This would also give them ownership and involvement in the team. By building autonomy, we are encouraging them to develop more intrinsic motivation (Vealey, 2005, p. 36). We would continue including athletes in decisions throughout the season with matters such as uniforms, game-day roster, and skills to focus.

Another way we would work toward involvement and initiative taking in the athletes would be to encourage the players to develop a volunteer day. We would guide them through the steps of deciding what time of event interests them and how to organize or get involved with the event. By giving them this task, they will be able to take initiative as well as participate in an activity that is relevant to them to bond as a team and translate skills from sports to life skills (Camire, 2011, p. 97).

The fifth step in the Self-Determination Theory is to provide competent feedback that is not controlling (Mallett, 2005, p. 420). We would meet this by setting up a goal strategy system for the athletes that would allow for athletes to develop goals based on what motivates them and their current ability. This will again allow them to voice their own ideas as well as make sure that everyone can set goals to feel successful. We would guide the athletes using the GROW Model to develop goals for individuals and athletes. By using the questions presented by the GROW Model, we are guiding the discussion of goals, instead of controlling the goals and actions players should take. Once goals are set, we will use guidelines for SMART goals (Vealey, 2005, p. 155) to make sure the goals are specific, measurable, aggressive but achievable, relevant and time-bound. By making sure they fit these categories, we can assure

that they will get relevant feedback within a set time and feel success by accomplishing their goals. The more success they feel, the more intrinsically motivated and self-determined the athletes will become (Vealey, 2005, p. 36).

By providing the athletes with an abundance of opportunities to be involved with developing the culture of the team, we are taking the emphasis away from the control of the coach and thus reducing controlling behavior, which is the sixth step to autonomy supported coaching (Mallett, 2005, p. 420). By involving all members of the team, we are de-emphasizing the “importance” of the highest talented athletes by making sure that all members’ feelings and opinions are considered. And as a coach, we would make sure that the rules included more meaningful playing time for all athletes and playing time based on effort, timeliness, and grades. This takes away the ego-centered idea of a team, the final step to forming an autonomy supported team (Mallett, 2005, p. 420).

Using the Self-Determination Theory of Motivation will allow the athletes to be stimulated and challenged as they will be able to set their own goals and rules. It will also allow them to feel competent and accomplished as they realize they can be an integral member of the team both from their verbal input and by meeting the SMART goals they set for themselves. And lastly, we believe the extra communication needed to discuss each other’s feelings and set up a team culture will cause for them to feel more of a sense of ownership and belonging. Thus, by following the Self-Determination Theory, we are providing all the key aspects to motivate humans. And many of these skills are also transferable life skills that will hopefully allow our athletes to stay or become intrinsically motivated and self-determined in many aspects of their lives (Camire, 2011, p. 97).

## References

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