



UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS - FORT SMITH

BUILDING AND MAINTAINING A WINNING CULTURE

The hottest buzz word among college basketball programs and sports organizations today is "Culture." Much is made of building a Winning Culture, but not much is written or discussed on how to create or maintain such a Culture.

For 36 years, I have had the opportunity to lead and rebuild seven different collegiate basketball programs. Building and maintaining winning cultures in a variety of settings; rural and urban, private and public, big and small spanning over five different decades.

Through this time we have made our share of mistakes, but we have also had a ton of successes, and we have continued to develop and learn about Culture through our mistakes and our success; how to build a winning culture, and even more importantly, how to maintain it. We continue to learn daily, as technology and society changes. In this article, it's our hope to share with you, a few ideas regarding Culture that may prove to be helpful in your situation with your program and team.

Culture is not the most important thing...it's the only thing. Apple coined the phrase, "Culture eats strategy for lunch." Nothing is more important than culture, nothing. It's more important than X's and O's, offensive and defensive schemes, it shapes who you are, your organization and the people who make up your organization.

In his book, *Above the Line*, Urban Meyer says, "as a leader, you are responsible for creating a winning culture...it's not someone else's job. It's your job!"

Mike Smith, the former head coach of the Atlanta Falcons, in the book *You Win in the Locker Room First*, echoes Coach Meyer but adds, "It is your responsibility as the leader, it starts with you, but understand that culture grows from the bottom up."

You can have the best Culture in place with bad people, and the Culture will not survive, it will not be successful. But you can have great people and a Bad Culture and you can survive, at least for a short period of time.

Creating a Championship Culture is hard...there isn't a road map, it's not a science. There aren't a perfect 10 steps to building a winning Championship Culture. But, there are some common denominators.

Culture is not about signs and slogans, it's about people and leadership. I heard Coach Dick Bennett say this many years ago, and we have lived by this axiom every since that time.

"When you are taking over a new program, building a program...start by recruiting people you can lose with first, before you win."

Let that thought soak in for just a moment. People you can lose with first, before you win.

In other words, young men that you can depend upon, that will remain committed to your purpose, that will not lose the identity of your culture when hard times come, and they will come. Failure is going to happen, but you never lose unless you quit.

We always say, you can put a necktie on a Hog and dress him up real nice, but at the end of the day he is still a Hog. You have to pick the right people, the people who fit the "Blueprint" of your Culture. We have found through the years that anytime we deviate from this it always comes back to hurt our Program and our Culture.

We say, first we will be Champions, then we will Win Championships. Therefore, it all starts by surrounding yourself with people of high character. And, we take it one step further, we want people who have an energy about them, that are excited to be a part of our Team. Young men who want to be coached by us, the way we coach.

Again, we thoroughly believe that it is the Leader's responsibility to engage hearts and minds, to energize and enthuse your Team, to be a visionary.

Doc Rivers, the great NBA coach, says to have a Championship Team a Championship Culture, you have to be 110% committed to the Coach, the System, and the Mission.

The Coach; this is you the leader of your program. The System; not just the X's & O's, but the daily process...the Blueprint of your Culture. The Mission; your ultimate goal, the vision, your North Star.

Our "Blueprint" consists of four pillars, the four cornerstones of our Culture. Each Cornerstone is of equal importance, they are listed in no particular order.

Hard Work: Hard work doesn't guarantee you anything, but without it you have nothing. We are a Hard Work Basketball Program, it starts at the top and is demanded throughout our Program. Therefore, we must recruit players, our coaching staff and managers that have an aptitude for Hard Work, and have a demonstrated resume of their work ethic for us to build upon.

Toughness: How many games have you lost as a coach, and made this statement, we are just not tough enough. For us, it's not nearly as much about the physical toughness as it is about the mental. We are a program of execution and therefore nothing is more important to this end than our ability to understand the value of repetition. This takes mental toughness...we say,

TGHT: The Game Honors Toughness.

Passion: To work as hard as we require, to embrace the grind of being your best, you have to love it. We want the "Have too" guys, the guys who have to be successful who have an incredible competitive spirit, not just the "Want too" guys, who want to be successful. And, we're not just referring to the court, but in the weight room, the film room, on the bus, in the hotel, on campus and most importantly in the class room. The guys who love it all the time, who love the grind, the process.

Unity: It can be difficult in our current society of Me to find those who are totally invested in We...but to be us, you have to be on our mission, to be unselfish, to be willing to sacrifice for your brothers. There is an old African Proverb; if you want to go fast, go alone. But, if you want to go far, go together. Nothing great has ever been achieved without a Team effort. It takes all us with both feet in the boat fully committed to our Vision, our North-Star.

I would like to take a few moments now to briefly discuss Seven of our Core Beliefs in Building and Maintaining a Winning Culture.

- 1) **The Right Stuff:** The winning is in the picking. I love the quote from the 1980 Olympic Hockey Coach, Herb Brooks, speaking to his assistant coach, Craig Patrick in selecting the Team. "We are not looking for the best ones Craig, we are looking for the right ones." This is us, we are not about collecting talent, we are about putting together a Team. And, we absolutely will not sacrifice character for athleticism or talent. We will be successful with quality young men.
- 2) **Vision:** It's your responsibility as the Leader to create a compelling vision for your Team, a North Star. Yes, we are a process oriented program, it's all about winning the day, but it's important that our Team has an ultimate direction on which to focus upon and that we communicate it often.

- 3) Family: Building and fostering a Family Atmosphere for our Team is Of paramount importance in creating an environment of Trust and Mentoring. This is the foundation of our Team. A coach led team can be good, a player led team can be great. Developing internal leadership in the locker room, in the dorms, there is a voice echoing your Team's Culture and your leadership when you are not there. Therefore, you must promote and mentor the leaders of your team.
- 4) Standards: This is the Blue Print, it's who we are. This is us, this is not us. Your Team must know what your Standards are, your Non-negotiables, they don't need to guess, they need to know.
- 5) Accountability: Now that you have established your Standards, the Expectations of your Program, you have to hold your Team Accountable. Accountability builds Trust and a Family environment, without it, you will have chaos. The difference between competing and winning, is Accountability.
- 6) Challenge Daily: We must create Competition, which in turn creates growth, both collectively and individually. We want our Team to strive daily for more, to accomplish more, to develop a collective competitive spirit.
- 7) Celebrate Culture: And finally, we want to create ways to positively recognize and celebrate those who are living out and demonstrating our Culture. It's important to us that we create joy in the journey.

In closing, we feel that you must search for various ways in which you can sell your Culture to your Team. We utilize a number of different vehicles to communicate our Core Beliefs and the Four Pillars of our Culture.

One of my favorite methods is the use of our Team Notebooks. Each Notebook has our Pillars listed prominently on the cover. Thus, everyday prior to anything we do as a Team, our Players see our Core Values and how we want to administer them.

We require their notebooks to be present and open for all meetings, film sessions, individual meetings, pre-practice meetings, on road trips, the bus, anytime we are together they are responsible to have their notebook ready to take notes. We use these note taking sessions to emphasize our Culture, every opportunity that we have, to talk about our North Star, our vision.

Finally, I encourage you to build your Culture, one that fits you and your Program. Value it, live it, reinforce it constantly and fight for it daily. Do not allow anyone or anything to sabotage your Culture, stay true to who you are and the process.