

DELTA STATE BASKETBALL

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 such a Culture.

For 39 years, I have had the opportunity to lead and rebuild eight different collegiate basketball programs. Building and maintaining a winning culture in a variety of settings; rural and urban, private and public, big and small spanning over five decades.

Through this time we have made mistakes, but we have also had a ton of success, and we have continued to develop and learn about Culture, 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*, echo's 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.

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.

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.

Again, we thoroughly believe that it is the Leaders 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. We have intentionally listed each one as number one, because each is of equal importance.

1) **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.

1) **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.**

- 1) **Discipline:** We choose the "Harder Right". I am going to pour my heart and soul into you, and I will not compromise. I will challenge you to be your best, I will push you past your perceived limits. You will be held to the highest standards of character, attitude and effort. And, I will hold you accountable to these standards.
- 1) **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 the Seven Secrets of 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) **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.
- 3) **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.
- 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.
- 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. We will preach the gospel everyday and sometimes we will use words.

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 to our Program the **7 Secrets of Building a Winning Culture, our Pillars, who we are**, etc.

One of my favorite methods is the use of our **Team Notebooks**. Each Notebook has our Pillars and the 7 Secrets 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.

