Managing Organizational Culture in Intercollegiate Athletic Organizations

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The purpose of this paper is to link concepts of organizational culture, traditionally viewed from a corporate perspective, to management of intercollegiate athletic organizations. Relevant literature is reviewed to identify definitions and components of organizational culture, as well as elements of cultural strength. The relationship of culture to transformational leadership is recognized and ideas regarding how culture has been deciphered and managed in a corporate setting are presented. In addition, a critical perspective regarding organizational culture is examined and recognition is given to the importance of democratic ideals in the development of a “positive” culture. Recognizing that strong positive culture in a corporate organization generally equates with overall success, the implications for athletic organizations are important. These implications are discussed, and suggestions for athletic administrators and head coaches regarding culture management in collegiate sport organizations are presented.

Organizational culture is a topic that has received increasing attention over the last several years. As a result, the concept of organizational culture and its implications for business managers has appeared in both academic and professional trade literature. Although traditionally reviewed in terms of corporate business, organizational culture has recently generated interest among sport management researchers and practitioners (Wallace & Weese, 1995; Weese, 1995). However, an applied approach to analyzing organizational culture and its relationship to management and leadership in intercollegiate athletic organizations has received little attention.

In competitive sport organizations, as in corporate settings, there is a “bottom line” regarding success of the business. This bottom line in school athletic programs usually involves winning games, putting people in the seats, and attracting media attention, sponsorships, and donations. However, these things are not easily accomplished and maintained. As a result of failure to produce winning teams or to produce competitive and financially sound programs, coaches and athletic directors are often released or reassigned after short tenures. Turnover is a common occurrence and the lack of job stability at many institutions keeps these
sport organizations in seemingly continuous turmoil. On the other hand, institutions that have developed stability in their athletic departments are faced with continual management of a rapidly changing environment. New student athletes and internal and external opportunities and threats are a continuous management issue.

As a result of the competitive sport business environment, maintaining or rebuilding athletic departments and/or athletic programs are challenges facing head coaches and athletic directors each year. Because of this, it is possible that an understanding of organizational culture and the role it plays in determining the strength of an organization could be extremely important in the organizational development process. It is also likely that athletic directors and head coaches, each equipped with better knowledge regarding how to identify and manage culture, could improve the stability and overall success of their organizations and programs.

Before proceeding, however, it should be noted that some consider the concept of organizational culture to be rooted primarily in a “corporate” philosophy that is characterized by authoritarian control and an absence of workplace democracy. In addition, institutional sport organizations have been associated with this type of organizational structure and leadership (Eitzen, 1996; Massengale & Sage, 1995). This is certainly a viable concern and is discussed in detail following a general description of organizational culture.

**Definitions and Elements of Organizational Culture**

Organizational culture has been defined in a variety of ways ranging from theoretical to extremely practical. Wallace and Weese (1995, p. 183) credited culture scholars with defining organizational culture as the “deep-rooted beliefs, values, and assumptions widely shared by organizational members that powerfully shape the identity and behavioral norms for the group.” Robbins (1996) broadly defined organizational culture as a system of shared meaning held by members of the organization. Hawk (1995, p. 32) simply defined organizational culture as “what it’s like to work around here.”

However, it is important to note that controversy exists in the literature regarding the concept of “organizational culture” and its distinction from “organizational climate.” Culture, with its theoretical foundation in social anthropology, has been recognized to exist primarily at the “core” of an organization and is not easily uncovered through external observation (Schein, 1985, 1996). Climate, on the other hand, has its theoretical roots in social psychology and generally reflects measurable employee perceptions about the work environment. Climate was described by Schneider, Gunnarson, and Niles-Jolly (1994) as “the atmosphere that employees perceive is created in their organizations by practices, procedures, and rewards.”

In addition, review of the literature uncovered numerous discrepancies regarding the theoretical foundations, possible overlap, methods of measurement, and use of these two concepts in organizational studies (Denison, 1996; Moran & Volkwein, 1992; Reichers & Schneider, 1990). As noted by Denison (1996, p. 645), “these two research traditions should be viewed as differences in interpretation rather than differences in the phenomenon.”

However, the purpose of this article was not to argue the difference between these two constructs but rather to recognize that they (collectively) are of importance in organizational management. As indicated by Schneider, Brief, and Guzzo (1996, p. 9), “changing the climate is important to changing what an organization’s
members believe and what they believe their organization values. These beliefs and values constitute the organization’s culture. It was in this context that the term “culture” was used in this article.

Using the term “organizational culture,” Deal and Kennedy (1982) identified five elements that play a role in culture development. These were (a) business environment, (b) values, (c) heroes, (d) rites and rituals, and (e) cultural network. Of the five, the business environment was identified as having the single greatest influence on shaping culture. Rites and rituals were recognized as the systematic routines in the day-to-day life of the organization that show members the kind of behavior expected of them (Deal & Kennedy, 1982, p. 14). Also, Deal and Kennedy recognized the importance of heroes that personify the cultural values of the organization in the development of culture.

Several other elements or characteristics of organizational culture have also been identified. These include a determination of who makes important organizational decisions, the degree of risk-taking, the attention to detail in the organization, what is expected from employees, the degree to which management focuses on outcomes rather than processes, and the meaning of success in the organization (O’Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991; Hawk, 1995). In addition, Newman and Carpenter (1993, p. 220), stated that “organizational cultures have both formal and informal structures. The formal structure is generally depicted on the organizational chart. However, many activities occur in organizations that do not appear on a chart. According to Newman and Carpenter (p. 220), these activities “constitute the informal” structure. The informal structure plays a role in organizational politics and aids people in determining what behaviors are and are not acceptable within an organization.

Regarding assumptions about organizational cultures, Schein (1993) identified several levels at which culture can be analyzed. In Schein’s analysis, technology, office layout, manner of dress, visible behavior, and public documents all represent “visible artifacts” of the culture (p. 47). Another area for analysis, according to Schein, dealt with espoused values held by organizational members. Schein pointed out that determining the difference between espoused values and actual values was difficult to determine. For that reason, Schein believed that underlying assumptions were more powerful in determining the culture of an organization than espoused values. Schein (p. 48) stated, “As espoused values lead to behaviors that begin to solve problems, the values are transformed into underlying assumptions about how things really are.” Schein went on to say, “To stay at the level of artifacts or espoused values is to deal with manifestations of culture but not with the cultural essence” (p. 50). For this reason, a complete analysis of organizational culture would require uncovering the underlying assumptions regarding the organization. Only then, from Schein’s perspective, would a person truly understand the values and beliefs held collectively by members of the culture.

In recent years, organizational culture has also been identified with the concept of militarism. According to Garsombke (1988, p. 46), “Today, people in organizations are hearing and reading more and more about strategies and concepts couched in military terms.” Garsombke pointed out that books such as Jay Levinson’s Guerilla Marketing and Al Ries and Jack Trout’s Marketing Warfare are examples of how militaristic strategies are being incorporated into organizational culture. Garsombke (1988, p. 47) also recognized that, “By adopting military models, concepts, and terminologies in their organizational operations, many
managers may be creating a military culture for their organizations.” However, as discussed in the following section, this may not be the appropriate strategy for every organization.

A Critical Perspective

Particularly in regard to higher education environments, of which this article is focused, there have been concerns regarding the authoritarian methods often associated with a militaristic approach to organizational management (Massengale & Sage, 1995). These scholars argue against a traditional corporate model that does not support an equalization or distribution of power within an organization. As they indicated (p. 64), “Power can be distributed very narrowly, and such a situation is said to be autocratic, or it can be widely distributed as in a democracy.”

In another perspective on power in organizations, Bolman and Deal (1991), recognized the “political frame” as one of four organizational perspectives that are essential to understanding organizational characteristics and processes. In their view, several propositions characterize the political frame in organizations. One of these propositions recognized that “because of scarce resources and enduring differences, conflict is central to organizational dynamics, and power is the most important resource.” (Bolman & Deal, p. 186). However, power does not have to be centralized nor authoritarian. As Bolman and Deal (p. 190) pointed out, “Traditional views of organizations . . . assume that organizations have, or ought to have, clear and consistent goals. Generally, the goals are presumed to be established by those in authority.” Bolman and Deal (p. 190) went on to say that “the political frame, however, insists that organizational goals are set through negotiations among members of coalitions.”

Certainly, scarce resources and conflict are also evident in intercollegiate sport organizations. Budget constraints, market competition, scheduling, gender equity, and even the coaching and management of athletes all play a role in introducing conflict among programs and/or members of these organizations. It could be argued that important decisions in athletic organizations and particularly athletic teams are not generally characterized by negotiation among coalition members but rather by centralized authority that imposes its will on those lower in the hierarchy.

Regarding the relationship between the power perspective and the culture of an organization, readers are reminded that culture reflects the values and assumptions held at the core of an organization that are widely shared by organizational members. It is likely that a culture characterized, in part, by negotiation and distribution of power as opposed to authoritarian hierarchical control is more conducive to individual development, satisfaction, and performance. However, one must also recognize that external demands and societal pressures often lead those in administrative or management positions to be hesitant in distributing power to group members who, in the end, may not be accountable for the performance of the organization. This appears to be true in regard to most athletic teams, whereby the head coach faces, rightly or not, the demand to produce a winning team in order to retain employment.

The aforementioned concerns have been reflected in literature regarding the leadership and organizational management of school sports in the United States.
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(Eitzen, 1996; Sage, 1973). It has been recognized that many of the management practices in sport appear to have evolved out of scientific management theory (Taylor, 1911), where goals of the organization are placed above needs of individual workers. As indicated by Sage (1973, p. 36), “American business enthusiastically adopted Taylor’s approach to management leadership, and this leadership style has frequently been used by various nonbusiness organizations such as schools, the military, and sports.” In regard to team sports, Sage (p. 37) recognized this form of management when suggesting that “the organization in this case is the team and the players under this form of leadership are the instruments for the fulfillment of organizational goals.” Eitzen (1996, p. 74), added that “coaches, with very few exceptions, are autocratic. They impose their will on team rules, discipline, personnel decisions, and strategy.”

With these ideas in mind, it could be argued that an “organizational culture,” which is both authoritarian in nature and nonsupportive of individual member’s needs, is not an optimal model for an organization. In regard to school sports, Eitzen (1996) and Sage (1973) both suggested that incorporating a human relations approach to management that fosters a more democratic environment is advisable. However, Sage (p. 40) also recognized that “it is nonsense to suppose that every step in coaching can be democratic. That a leader may have to unilaterally make decisions for the group does not necessarily diminish his sensitivity and humanism for the members.” Perhaps, as pointed out by Garsombke (p. 52), “Organizational culture developers might merge certain positive elements from the militaristic culture with the humanistic advantages of nonmilitaristic cultures to form a new cultural schema.” It is from this perspective that the views regarding culture management provided in the present article were intended. The following sections include, where appropriate, ideas regarding the infusion of democratic principles and humanistic management into the concept of organizational culture.

Cultural Strength in Organizations

Strength is an important consideration when analyzing the existing cultural conditions of a company or organization. It is important to recognize that cultural strength can be an asset or a liability. As indicated by Robbins (1996, p. 241), “Culture is a liability when the shared values do not agree with those that will further the organization’s effectiveness.” Schein (1993, p. 51) recognized that “cultural strength may or may not be correlated with effectiveness.”

However, for the purpose of this article, all following reference to the term “cultural strength” refers to a strong “positive” culture and its role in organizational effectiveness. In addition, a “positive” culture is suggested by this author to be one that is not suppressive, controlling, and authoritarian.

According to Schein (1993, p. 51), a strong culture is defined as “the homogeneity and stability of group membership and the length and intensity of shared experiences of the group.” With this definition in mind, it appears that strong culture organizations are those whose members share a common belief system and have had the opportunity to work together over a period of time through challenging experiences. Robbins (1996, p. 239) points out that, in strong cultures, there is a “high agreement among members about what the organization stands for” and that these cultures are resistant to change because of employee commitment.
Deal and Kennedy (1982) support the concept of cultural strength by recognizing that strong cultures help employees do their jobs better. The ways in which a strong culture influences job performance can be seen in the way that employees behave and react to work situations. In strong cultures, the informal rule system spells out how people should behave. Also, in strong cultures, people feel better about what they do and are more likely to work harder. Deal and Kennedy (p. 15) stated, “Strong culture companies remove a great degree of uncertainty because they provide structure and standards and a value system in which to operate.” In addition, Schein recognized that once an organization has a strong culture, the “culture can survive high turnover at lower ranks, if the leadership remains stable” (p. 51).

**Relationship of Culture to Transformational Leadership**

According to Robbins (1996, p. 151), “Transformational leaders inspire followers to transcend their own self-interests for the good of the organization.” Robbins also identified transformational leaders as those who are self-confident, have a vision, demonstrate extraordinary behavior, and are agents of radical change. Bass (1990) recognized:

> Superior leadership performance—transformational leadership—occurs when leaders broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and when they stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group. (p. 21)

Another fundamental component of transformational leadership theory is the idea of empowerment and social justice (Burns, 1978; Foster, 1989). As indicated by Klaver (1994) in his study of transformative leadership theory in physical education and sport, “Authority can be employed to empower others, while authoritarianism is a method through which leaders disempower others. A transformative leader utilizes the authority that goes with his/her position as a leader to empower, not disempower.”

In a recent study of transformational leadership, Weese (1995, p. 130) stated, “A transformational leader . . . helps influence a culture that perpetuates and reinforces a philosophy of excellence and continual improvement.” In this study, Weese found that college recreation programs administered by high transformational leaders possessed significantly stronger cultures than programs administered by low transformational leaders. It was also determined in the study that critical culture-building activities were carried out to a greater extent by high transformational leaders than by low transformational leaders.

However, studies of this nature have not been done specifically addressing the relationship between transformational leadership and cultural strength in intercollegiate athletic departments. The present author suggests that the most desirable athletic organization “cultures” are likely influenced by leaders who exhibit high transformational leadership as defined above. It is important to recognize, however, that this type of leadership in intercollegiate athletics may or may not have an influence on organizational success as often measured through wins and losses, attendance, and total revenue.
Deciphering and Managing Organizational Culture

The ability to decipher existing aspects of culture and use culture management concepts to create a "strong" culture can be important to managers of any organization. According to Schein (1993, p. 58), the four following elements are necessary when attempting to decipher an organization's culture:

1. Analyze the process and content of socialization of new members.
2. Analyze responses to critical incidents in the organization's history.
3. Analyze beliefs, values, and assumptions of culture creators.
4. Discuss puzzling features of culture with insiders of the organization.

Also important for managers is to recognize when a culture is in trouble and in need of direction. According to Deal and Kennedy (1982), there are several signs of a culture in trouble. These signs include such things as no clear values, lack of agreement among organizational members regarding what beliefs are most important, and heroes of the culture being destructive or disruptive. In addition, different parts of the organization having fundamentally different beliefs and being disorganized in its rituals of day-to-day life are further evidence of cultural problems.

Once an organization's culture has been deciphered, managing the culture becomes a separate problem. In their article on managing culture, Plant and Ryan (1988) presented a case study of an organization that had lost its culture and entered a period of uncertainty. Plant and Ryan discussed the process of how management went about identifying the problems, proposing a new culture, and actually creating a new culture for the organization. In this case study, several steps were identified as important in the general process for managing culture. Two of these steps critical in the process are described below.

Define the Company Culture as It Currently Exists

In this step, management's current set of values and assumptions related to the organization were identified. Also, the behavior of management in communicating important elements of culture to employees was analyzed. Using a questionnaire distributed to employees, managers identified problems such as too much centralized control, too many layers in the organization, and poor reward systems.

Build a Vision of the New Culture

In this step, managers were asked to produce a list of central values that must be in place in the new culture. Such things as hard work and commitment, proactive environment, achievement orientation, and good work conditions were identified as essential to the culture. Once these "values" were recognized, managers were asked to identify the specific steps needed to put the plan in place.

In addition to recognizing the need for culture management and building new visions, reward systems are important in supporting employees and building culture. According to Hawk (1995), there is a relationship between culture and reward systems. "By changing their cultures without also developing a reward system, companies run the risk of sending employees terribly mixed signals and are much less likely to sustain any gains" (p. 30). Hawk also explained that a total reward system that supports the culture should include five components. These
involve (a) direct finances, (b) indirect finances including benefits and noncash recognition, (c) identification, (d) challenges and feedback regarding work content, and (e) career opportunities such as growth, development, and job security.

**Implications for Athletics**

O’Reilly (1989) made a clear statement of the elements of a strong culture that are important to organizational effectiveness. He stated:

It is only when there exists both intensity and consensus that strong cultures exist. Organizational members must come to know and share a common set of expectations. These must, in turn, be consistently valued and reinforced across divisions and management levels. (p. 13)

O’Reilly pointed out that intensity was related to the amount of approval of the cultural norms and that consensus was related to the degree of consistency with which a norm is shared. For athletic directors and coaches, the concept described above is indicative of the need to have members at all levels of the organization identifying a common goal, sharing a commitment toward that goal, and being rewarded for meeting these expectations. Athletic departments too often operate as a collection of various sport programs, operating independent of a common goal and belief system for the “overall” organization. However, from the perspective of an optimal workplace democracy, it should be noted that the expectations for organizational members should be developed through interaction and communication at all levels of the organization as opposed to top-down imposition.

As discussed previously, before a value system can be put in place in an organization, it is sometimes necessary to determine what type of culture currently exists. Important to sport managers in deciphering an organization’s culture is to recognize that there are different types of cultures. Deal and Kennedy (1982) discuss several types of cultures, one of which seems to be most applicable to sport organizations. This type, called the “tough guy, macho culture” (p. 108) is characterized by individuals who regularly take high risks and get quick feedback on whether actions are right or wrong. Athletic directors and coaches, whether male or female, work in an environment that often supports the “tough guy, macho culture.” Recognizing that this type of “high risk” culture exists in many sport organizations may help both athletic directors and coaches in understanding and managing their organizations.

Other challenges to management of the culture in sport organizations exist. Weese (1995, p. 130) stated, “Sport managers in organizations that experience minimal staff turnover have greater challenges in modifying the culture of their organizations.” In certain circumstances, such as stable, winning athletic programs, the culture may not be in need of modification. However, in circumstances where programs are stagnant and there is minimal turnover in staff, an administrator faces significant challenges in attempting to change the culture. As a possible answer to this dilemma, Schein (1993, p. 59) proposed that “when attempting to establish a new culture, leadership must ensure invention of new and better solutions and provide some security for group members to give up old ideas and test new ones.” When facing extreme resistance however, Schein proposed that culture change may not even be possible without replacing the people who wish to hold on to all of the original culture. Some, however, might argue that this reflects a management
perspective that supports getting rid of opposition to the “new culture.” This author’s perspective is that removing or replacing people in an athletic organization should *only* be considered after they have been given adequate opportunity to express their views and that this is made possible without threats to job or position security.

On the other hand, in organizations that experience more frequent staff turnover, Weese (1995, p. 130) pointed out that “sport managers can create new, more positive organizational cultures through effective hiring and orientation practices.” This appears to be an important consideration for athletic directors and coaches who have recently taken over new programs and are free to hire and/or train new staff members. However, it is important at this point to clarify the present author’s perspective regarding the “effective hiring and orientation practices” suggested by Weese. In an athletic department context, the present author does not suggest that only potential employees be hired who submissively yield to management’s vision of the organization. In the same vein, it is not implied that new employees be trained and oriented in ways that suppress individualism. Rather, it is suggested that both employers and prospective employees attempt to pursue an optimal “fit” in the hiring and orientation process. As suggested by Larson and LaFasto (1989) in their discussion of team work in organizations, there are three common features of competent team members: (a) essential skills and abilities, (b) a strong desire to contribute, and (c) the capability of collaborating effectively. It is from this perspective that the present author proposes effective hiring and orientation practices in the development of an optimal organizational culture.

**Application of Information for Athletic Directors and Head Coaches**

As indicated previously, several studies have, at least in part, supported the relationship between organizational culture and the process of management (Martin, 1985; Plant & Ryan, 1988; Wallace & Weese, 1995; Weese, 1995). In intercollegiate athletic departments, the principles of management and culture generally apply at more than one level of the organization. According to Slack (1997, p. 283), “While culture is often presented as a unitary entity, most sport organizations have a dominant culture and one or more subcultures. These competing cultures can lead to organizational conflict if they are not managed.”

For purposes of the ensuing discussion, the overall athletic department at any given institution is recognized as the “dominant” culture. At this level, the athletic director is considered to be the culture manager. The subcultures consist of the various sports programs within the athletic department, with the head coach of each team responsible for creating and/or managing the culture at that level. At both of these levels, it is important to remember that organization members must learn and share common expectations in order for a strong culture to exist.

**Suggestions for Athletic Administrators**

Athletic administrators, equipped with knowledge regarding organizational culture, should have an advantage in creating and/or managing an optimal culture within their organizations. With this in mind, the following paragraphs briefly summarize the major points dealing with management of organizational culture that have been previously discussed. These ideas provide a framework from which athletic administrators can begin the culture management process.
To begin, an athletic director should determine the culture as it currently exists. For an athletic director new to a position, this may be a challenging task. However, with proper research, communication, and tact, the current values of the organization can likely be identified. Another consideration is to recognize all of the subcultures within the overall organization. Three specific suggestions for managing subcultures were suggested by Deal and Kennedy (1982, p. 153):

1. Encourage each subculture within the organization to enrich its own cultural life.
2. Try to focus subcultures on understanding the problems of other subcultures.
3. Point out how the overall culture is richer because of the strength of the subculture.

Using these suggestions as a starting point for culture management in an inter-scholastic or intercollegiate athletic department, athletic directors would be advised to meet with each program head coach and discuss factors involved in all three suggestions above. In circumstances where individual programs and/or entire athletic departments are being built or rebuilt, these suggestions could be extremely important in setting the initial framework for a strong overall organizational culture. Using this approach, the athletic director could gain valuable insight into the current culture and determine steps for strengthening the culture based on a collaborative effort.

The next step would be to develop a vision and strong personal value system around a perceived “ideal” organization. Once the elements of this value system were identified, the rites, rituals, and symbols (Deal & Kennedy, 1982) necessary to support these values and give visibility to the culture should be incorporated. Informal rules of behavior should be established for organizational members, and ambiguity surrounding professional expectations should be minimized. As discussed previously, a consideration in this process would be for the athletic director to take a transformational leadership approach and allow each program head coach to contribute to the decision process regarding the overall organizational culture.

Finally, a timely and adequate reward system should be put in place to reinforce behaviors that contribute to the strength of the culture. It is important that rewards be offered for actions that support the culture as opposed to rewards only for winning games. These rewards range from informal congratulations and thank yous to formal recognition and financial incentives.

**Suggestions for Head Coaches**

Creating strong belief systems (cultures) within program staff and athletic teams is certainly not new to coaches. In many instances, the head coach of a program, depending on the number of assistant coaches involved, faces the task of managing both employee and team culture. This, in itself, may be an immense task depending on the situation. However, when looking at the problem from only the team management perspective, one challenging feature of culture management for coaches is the turnover that occurs yearly as a result of graduation and recruiting. For this reason, coaches need to stay on top of culture management to ensure that a strong belief system, shared by all members of the team, carries over from one year to the next.
From the experience and perspective of this author, building a strong “positive” team culture requires the head coach to have a personal vision and belief system that is not imposed on assistant coaches and athletes but, rather, is developed and enhanced through collaboration with these individuals. As indicated by Sage (1973, p. 39), “In applying Human Relations leadership to sports, the coach will not assume without question that the total team program takes precedence over the needs and desires of team members.” Involving team captains, or even all team members, in the process of establishing the underlying assumptions or “values” for individual and team behavior should be considered.

As many head coaches would likely agree, rituals and symbols regarding what is important to team cohesiveness and success are a major component of making the team culture visible. Recognition of players of the week, fighting heart awards, motivational posters, team goal charts, and mascots are all examples of rituals and symbols supporting the “culture.”

Another important consideration for head coaches is to be able to decipher problems in the existing culture. If a coach has recently been hired for a program or is managing a team with several new players, the ability to recognize signs of a weak team culture is critical. As previously discussed, Deal and Kennedy (1982) pointed out several signs of a culture in trouble. Using Deal and Kennedy’s list as a model, one important sign of cultural weakness on an athletic team is the evidence of separate belief systems among athletes. This problem is compounded if athletes cannot agree on what values are most important to success. In dealing with this issue, the coach needs to recognize the extent that beliefs of individual team members are congruent with team goals. In personal conversations with athletes, as well as through observation, the coach can get an idea of the existing belief system. Discrepancies between what is observed and what is desired need to be dealt with in an appropriate manner so as to preserve a strong team culture. In clarifying this point, it is important to note that this does not imply unconditional removal of the team member (or members) whose attitudes or beliefs appear contradictory to those established by the “team.” Requiring unquestioned conformity is not suggested as the answer to preserving team culture. Rather, through the incorporation of transformational leadership, it is suggested that conflicts be approached first with the idea of empowerment and social justice. Again, from the experience and perspective of this author, listening to and considering the concerns of team members, regardless of whether they agree with team goals, represents an important step in building trust and collaboration. Also, it is the view of this author, that an environment allowing open exchange of ideas is conducive to a strong “positive” team culture. However, there may be instances, when the culture of an organization does not support the views and actions of some members. In these cases, an impasse may be reached whereby both the organization and the individual are better served through separation.

According to Deal and Kennedy (1982, p. 136), another sign of organizational trouble is when “heroes of the culture are destructive or disruptive and don’t build upon any common understanding of what is important.” In addition, as Deal and Kennedy suggested, cultural problems likely exist if it is apparent that rituals of day-to-day life are disorganized. In an athletic environment, this might be observable in such things as meetings as well as practice and game management.

When cultural problems do exist, the coach should determine a specific plan of action to change the existing culture. Although this is not generally an expeditious
process, recognizing the problem and developing a solution strategy are initial steps in creating a more desirable and stronger culture. Also, based on recommendations from culture experts, it is critical for a head coach to remember that a reward system that recognizes and honors those who support the “value system” provides the individual positive reinforcement necessary for building a strong team culture. In addition, as has been suggested in the article, the incorporation of more democratic approaches to leadership by athletic coaches is likely important in the long-term culture-building process.

Conclusions

Organizational culture is a concept that has distinct application in sport organizations. In terms of the administration of intercollegiate athletics, knowledge of culture management may provide athletic directors and even head coaches with new or improved tools for increasing the success of the organizations they manage. Certainly not a new concept in athletics, having everyone in the organization share a common belief system and work toward achieving a unified goal is critical to long-range success. As discussed in the paper, however, it is also important that democratic principles not be overlooked in the development or maintenance of an organization’s culture.

In this author’s opinion, establishing a distinct vision, collaborating with group members, setting and communicating clear objectives, allowing participation in decision making, providing principled leadership, and establishing a proper and timely reward system are keys to successful culture development. In addition to these principles, using information presented in this paper regarding how to decipher the existing culture and develop strategies for change should equip athletic administrators and head coaches with important information regarding organizational culture management.

References


