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Adventure to Excellence: An Adventure Approach to Creating a Positive BKL Team Culture

Adventure: 1. A journey through risk with uncertain outcomes and uncertain rewards; 2. A way of doing things where uncertain outcomes result in exploration & risk-taking in the context of a supportive community.

We ask our BKL Athletes to face risks every time they ski (the mousetrap exercise), and these mouse traps are mostly risks of a *social* nature (e.g., looking foolish, trying then failing publicly, falling down in front of friends, disappointing coaches or family members, striving for excellence in an age of irony…). Physical risks are mostly minor, although are often used to mask the actual social risks.

Fear of these risks undermines athlete learning and prevents optimal performance. Brain-based learning theory suggests that a person learns best when in a relaxed and moderately stimulated state. Fear prevents this learning because the fear centers of the brain (mostly the amygdala) prevent the normal memory pathways from forming. This blockage occurs just as quickly in physical skills as in cognitive skills. Also, excessive anxiety inhibits fun, and fun is a real tool for promoting cognitive and physical development as well as engagement and retention in the program. Bottom line – if we want our athletes to continue to learn new skills and to perform at their best, then we need to minimize these social risks, i.e., create an environment where there is a supportive human community that supports healthy risk taking. Creating this risk-supportive community is a practice that is a core element of Adventure Education, and it works in all education-oriented settings.

The key ingredients in promoting this supportive culture:

- Spend the time – especially at the beginning of group formation, but regularly throughout the season
- Open the dialogue – openly discuss the notion of a team culture that supports growth, and prioritize it as a team goal
- Model the behaviors – praise risk taking and other compassionate/caring behaviors; also, regularly show yourself taking social risks (like acting goofy, or trying a skill that you truly might not be able to do)
- Names - make sure every athlete knows every other athlete's name; it is the foundation of group civility.
- Ice breakers – also known as deinhibitizers, these "games" break down social barriers, allow athletes to experiment with looking less-than-cool, and are a chance for the coach to assess each athlete's level of social comfort in the group
- Trust and trustworthiness activities – a focus on how we demonstrate trustworthiness, and how we can critically assess another person's trustworthiness
- Develop group norms – *this is a fundamentally important element*, basically a social contract that defines behaviors that the group wants to promote and others that it

wants to leave behind. Sometimes called a "Full Value Contract". Often comes in two stages: first is a simple top down set of rules from the coaches (e.g., the "Five Finger Contract"). Second, after the group has had a chance to work together for a little while, is a more in-depth discussion that produces a document, generated mostly by the athletes, that has more impact, credibility and longevity than the top-down norms
- Activities and reflective discussion – intentional discussions in which the group processes how they are upholding their group norms. Can be based on everyday experiences, or can be used as a follow-up to classic experiential learning games/initiatives/activities (see resources list)
- FUNN (Functional Understanding Not Necessary) – purely silly games, that are pretty much just for fun, but for the coach also provide an excellent barometer of the group culture, and of individual participant's comfort level. The ability to act completely silly in front of one's peers is a good measure of the degree to which a person's social fears are managed. The best are those in which a person ends up in the middle of a circle…

Why take the time? What rationale is there for spending limited team or league training time on these practices?

- Faster development of physical skills – athletes learn best when their fears are managed; human neurobiology prevents learning when faced with unmanaged fear, and social fears are usually more real and more powerful than most physical fears.
- Better retention of athletes in the program – the single biggest predictor of retention in youth programming is *not* athletic success; it is the degree to which the athlete has developed a meaningful social network (feelings of connectedness, supportedness, closeness/intimacy)
- Greater development of social and emotional intelligences, which are essential elements of personal and group leadership
- Simply because it develops more thoughtful, compassionate, caring and socially capable human beings!
- Because it will make the BKL experience, and the ski experience in general, more FUN.

Good resources for learning more about these practices and finding great games and activities for each of the steps above:

- Collard, M. (2005). *No Props: Great Games With No Equipment*. Beverly, MA: Project Adventure.
- Stanchfield, J. (2007). *Tips & Tools: The Art of Experiential Group Facilitation*. Oklahoma City, OK: Wood 'N' Barnes.
- Any book by Karl Rohnke:
  - *Quiksilver*
  - *Silver Bullets*
  - *Cowstails and Cobras*

- Website: www.wilderdom.com