

THE TRAINING GROUND

Accountability is a No Shame Zone

By Theresa “Tree” Beeckman, True North Sports Team Specialist

“You cannot shame or belittle people into changing their behavior.”

-Brene ˆ Brown

Coaching How We Were Coached

A large part of the work I do involves rethinking how we train and prepare coaches to take on the tasks of leading their athletes. In this country, we do not have an across sport, systematic or formal way of training athletic coaches. We have a hodgepodge of programs, sport conventions and clinics, as well as some sport specific licensing programs like those that exist for soccer. While many of those programs are great and incredibly valuable, they are not a substitute for the comprehensive preparation you would expect professional educators to receive. We don’t usually say to a person, “you were once in third grade, so you are obviously qualified to teach third grade.” When it comes to athletic coaching, the same is certainly not true. A coaching hire’s experience as a player of a sport is often the main qualification for obtaining the job. As a result, coaches are often prepared by way of informal apprenticeship. Thus, they also often coach how they were coached.

Coaching how you were coached isn’t always bad, but when it comes to accountability, coaches are often getting it wrong relying on shaming and blaming rather than true, productive accountability with their players and staff. In addition, without intentional growth, self-reflection, and a healthy amount of self-awareness, many coaches inadvertently run around spilling their shame out onto their players.

Stop the Spill

While working with a club in the Southwestern part of the country, I heard a story about a club owner who had a troubling interaction with athletes after working with them on a specific skill. I had been brought in for the purposes of coach development largely because of the toxic environment that was being created by this club owner. This owner did have their own team but would spend time during training roaming from team to team coaching various fundamentals with athletes on all teams. During one such session, the owner pulled a few athletes to the side and worked with them on a particular skill for several minutes. When the athletes returned to the drill, they reverted to their original footwork much to the club owner’s dismay. In response the owner began yelling at them and referred to them as third graders. At this point I asked the owner, who was in the room as well, how old the players were. “Fifteen and sixteen,” they replied. “Okay, and how do you think it made them feel to be referred to in that context as third graders,” I asked? “Probably not great,” the owner replied. “And did they magically clean up their footwork and start doing it the way you had trained them to do in response to this degrading comment,” I asked? “No. Definitely not,” the owner replied. So here is my question for that owner and for all coaches everywhere: When a player isn’t getting something we’re trying to teach them and the coach responds with anger and/or yelling or degrading comments, who is that coach truly angry with? Who in that moment is the coach actually frustrated with? Nine times out of ten, that person the coach is mad at or ashamed of is themselves. And in response to that shame, somewhere along the way, we in athletics normalized taking that shame, frustration, and anger out on players and calling that good or tough coaching. The greatest thing about this generation is that they’re not having it. They are calling for better, higher level leadership and they are not wrong.

Coaches become better coaches when they have done work to understand their own shame triggers so they’re not walking around spilling their shame out on their athletes and staff. Spilling shame and wielding power, fear and blame is not accountability. It is low level leadership and it’s a limiting force on your team.

Step one to creating a braver culture with true accountability, is to do the work to understand how your own story affects your daily life. Ideally all coaches would be required to either attend therapy themselves or join a formal group of coaches with a trained facilitator where they share ongoing issues they’re facing for mentorship and feedback. In lieu of that, a good place to start this work is by consuming the work of Dr. Brene ˆ Brown, the famed shame researcher and storyteller.

A Better Way

In addition to doing your own work, here are things to consider in regard to accountability with today’s athlete:

1. “Do as I say, not as I do” has ALWAYS been a terrible way to lead, but with Gen Z it is a complete deal breaker. Coach, if you have expectations of your players to be on time you better hold yourself to that standard. If you have expectations that they control their body language and regulate their emotions, you better not be a lunatic on the sidelines. If you are prone to lose your mind if they miss a meeting, you better keep your meeting time with them. If you do have those expectations and you screw up, you had better model what it looks like to own your mistakes with them. Top down, power over leadership has always been the lowest level of leadership, thankfully we are being called to a much higher level of leadership, and it’s a great thing if you embrace it.
2. Clear boundaries allow for faster growth. Consider the road up to Pike’s Peak in Colorado. If you’ve never driven up to the summit before, trust me when I tell you it’s not for the faint of heart. The 19-mile trip up to the summit can take around 2 hours to drive. Much of the reason for the slower rate of this drive is the lack of guardrails along most of the route. Without guardrails, the 14,000-foot climb becomes more and more daunting with each and every switch back. The same is true for you and your team. Creating boundaries based on principles rather than situationally specific occurrences allows everyone on the team to know exactly what to expect. Following those boundaries with consistency cements and strengthens them. If you can’t follow a boundary for everyone, for the good of your entire program, you must not create it. Having a rule or boundary and not enforcing it when called upon is like building guardrails along a highway out of cardboard. This isn’t just for the rule you didn’t enforce. Any time you fail to live by a boundary or rule set within your program’s structure, every single rule loses meaning and strength for your team. For more on team boundaries and guardrails, you can order a copy of my workbook, *Managing Your Culture* here: <https://truenorthsports.net/product/managing-your-culture/>

In Dr. Brene ˆ Brown’s book *The Gifts of Imperfection* she talks about boundaries in a way I believe should be required reading for all coaches. In it, she says:

“One of the greatest (and least discussed) barriers to compassion practice is the fear of setting boundaries and holding people accountable.”

She goes on to explain that before she understood the connection between boundaries, accountability, acceptance, and compassion, she was perhaps sweeter on the outside, but she was definitely more resentful and angrier on the inside. I see that same dynamic showing up in coaches in much of my work today. She goes on to give an example that I want to share here. It’s an example from her work in business, but I believe it’s an easy leap to see how it applies to an athletic team setting:

“We live in a blame culture - we want to know whose fault it is and how they’re going to pay. In our personal, social, and political worlds, we do a lot of screaming and finger-pointing, but we rarely hold people accountable. How could we? We’re so exhausted from ranting and raving that we don’t have the energy to develop meaningful consequences and enforce them. From Washington D.C. and Wall Street to our own schools and homes, I think this rage-blame-too-tired-and-busy-to-follow-through mind-set is why we’re so heavy on self-righteous anger and so low on compassion.

Wouldn’t it be better if we could be kinder, but firmer? How would our lives be different if there were less anger and more accountability? What would our work and home lives look like if we blamed less but had more respect for boundaries?

I was recently brought in to talk with a group of corporate leaders who were trying to manage a difficult reorganization in their company. One of the project managers told me that, after listening to me talk about the dangers of using shame as a management tool, he was worried that he shamed his team members. He told me that when he gets really frustrated, he singles people out and criticizes their work in team meetings.

He explained, “I’m so frustrated. I have two employees who just don’t listen. I explain every single detail of the project, I check to make sure they understand, and they still do it their way. I’m out of options. I feel backed into a corner and angry, so I take them down in front of their colleagues.”

When I asked him how he was holding these two employees accountable for not following the project protocol, he replied, “What do you mean accountable?”

I explained, “After you check with them to make sure they understand your expectations and the objectives, how do you explain the consequences of not following the plan or not meeting the objectives?”

He said, “I don’t talk about the consequences. They know they’re supposed to follow the protocol.”

I gave him an example, “Okay. What would happen if you told them that you were going to write them up or give them an official warning the next time they violated protocol and that if it continues, they’re going to lose their jobs?”

He shook his head and said, “Oh, no. That’s pretty serious. I’d have to get the human resources people involved. That becomes a big hassle.”

Setting boundaries and holding people accountable is a lot more work than shaming and blaming. But it’s also much more effective. Shaming and blaming without accountability is toxic to couples, families, organizations, and communities.”

In a low trust, cancel culture climate like today’s, getting accountability right is the difference between thriving and failing. Having rules that back you into a corner and then working to find creative ways not to enforce them when your best player breaks them is a recipe for low performance. Setting clear boundaries based on principles that allow you to make decisions and lead with grace and consistency is harder, but in today’s climate it is the formula for success.

Additional Resources:

Managing Your Culture, by Theresa Beeckman: <https://truenorthsports.net/product/managing-your-culture/>

Gifts of Imperfection, by Dr. Brene ˆ Brown: <https://brenebrown.com/book/the-gifts-of-imperfection/>