



Building Culture

The word “culture” has become a buzzword in basketball circles as coaches across the country try to help their teams forge a winning identity. The idea of creating or building a team culture can become a cliché if we fail to appreciate the importance of the concept. Put simply, your team lives and dies by the culture it creates. Talented teams without healthy culture can easily lose to less-talented groups with great culture. The benefits of culture are obvious; togetherness, selflessness, chemistry, and continuity are just a few of the intangibles that allow your team to perform at high level.

What can get lost in discussions about how to build culture are practical suggestions on how to promote healthy culture on your team. Inevitably, high school programs face challenges that teams in the NBA (and to an extent NCAA) don’t have to worry about. Standard high school programs have no control over recruiting – although that assumption could be challenged at times – and have a high turnover rate. In addition, the players in the program are spread across three different teams and the number of players who start as freshman and graduate as seniors dwindles as the years progress. Consider the following suggestions that could help your program build and sustain a healthy culture for years to come.

Create Collective Buy-In

Coaches will often (and should) have a list of “core-identity” values that are consistent from year-to-year - i.e. selflessness, hard work, toughness, excellence etc. However, to ensure that these values infiltrate themselves into the culture of your team, you will need 100% buy-in from your best leaders. Your leaders must take ownership of these values or they will be in danger of becoming another mute talking point. One great way to do this is to meet with your leaders before the season and have them come up with a list of standards that reflect the core values (these can and should be extremely practical). For example, if one of your core values is toughness, then a corresponding standard could be “no offensive rebounds”. Now, during practice your leaders can enforce this standard – for example

ARETE HOOPS

making everyone who misses a box-out do 10 pushups etc. Remember coaches create rules but only players can enforce standards. Once you come up with a list of standards get creative how you choose to communicate it with the team and make sure to ask for buy-in from everyone - ex. you could create a poster with the list of standards and have everyone on the team sign it.

Create Mentor Relationships

The best way to ensure consistent culture is to encourage great relationships. It is natural for teams to segment into their own age groups/ability levels, but anything you can do to encourage cross-pollination between teams will go a long way in building sustainable culture. This process starts with your older players. For girls teams it might be as simple as assigning a "little-buddy" for whom you can buy gifts or encourage by decorating their locker etc. For guys, you might assign a "buddy" but you would also want to create some kind of competitive environment where that relationship could flourish - i.e. hold a shooting competition before or after practice, or a dodge-ball tournament. In addition to these personal relationships little stuff like having the varsity team form a tunnel and high-five the JV team as they exit the locker room can go a long way to meld three individual teams into an entire program. One of the greatest legacies a senior class can have is to know they have raised up the next generation of leaders to continue the tradition where they left off.

Create Memories

Memories resulting from shared experience are a powerful way to build culture. Not only do shared experiences bring teams closer together, but also begin to build a tradition in your program as stories get passed down from one generation to the next. The type of activities could vary as widely as taking a camping trip, planning an amazing race around campus, reserving a bowling alley, or having a pie-eating contest after practice. How you implement this idea can largely depend on the personality of your team and its type of leadership. Be sure that you study your team and understand how to accomplish this without coming across as corny or forced. Creating memories (particularly ones outside the basketball court) allow for nuanced relationships to develop which creates a stronger team and more dynamic culture.

Excellence – Imagination – Discipline – Greatness