

## Building a Team-Oriented Approach to Success

By

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Coaching in its purest sense is getting the team to play as one  
— John Odom, coach of the Wake Forest Deamon Deacons

### Introduction

Competitively, policy debate operates in a space that rewards both individual success and team performance. While a generic emphasis on individual success is usually considered to be at odds with group success or team performance, the reward structure that has built into the structure of policy debate creates the opportunity for the individual to be rewarded for both individual success and the success of the team. Debaters are rewarded for their individual success with speaker awards, rewarded for their success as a two person team with placement plaques, and are rewarded for group success with either high squad rankings or sweepstakes awards. The opportunities that are created by the structure, however, need to be taken advantage of and reinforced by coaches who are active supporters of a team-oriented squad. The educational and competitive benefits of a team-oriented approach are significant enough to warrant

attention to building a team dynamic.

### The Benefits of the Team Approach

There are many benefits to a team-oriented approach. Squads that function well as a team are likely to win more debates than those who do not, are more likely to graduate debaters who see debate as a productive interpersonal experience, and are more likely to benefit educationally from the experience.

Competitively. Working together as a team establishes greater opportunity in argument creation, strategy, research, and overall support. The larger the number of team members that are contributing toward the goal of winning individual debates, the more ideas for arguments that are likely to be generated both individually and as a result of interactive discussions between two or more members of the team. In this regard, team discussions begin to function as a hypertextual learning environment where the linkages between many ideas becomes arguments of their own. The larger the number of active participants, the greater the number of linkages and opportunities for generative interaction.

A well-functioning team provides not only opportunities for the generation of arguments but also the raw material that is

needed to generate those arguments. This raw material encompasses both raw energy and pure brain power. The material encompasses a number of factors including time spent scouting arguments that need to be need to be replicated, developed or beaten; time spent online or in the library gathering articles or citations; time spent reading the articles in search of the holy grail; time spent processing evidence and typing citations, time spent blocking the arguments' time spent copying those briefs; and time spent coaching and teaching the argument to other debaters. This significance of this raw material is multiplied at tournaments where there is a demand to complete this tasks in record time. The raw material of a cooperating team enables teams to both have more information and to take advantage of information, particularly scouting information.

Personally. Most debaters debate either for the thrill of winning or because they find that the friendships that they have built through the community are rewarding. For those debaters who are not as competitively successful as others, those interpersonal relationships are likely to be the glue that keeps them on the team. Interpersonal interaction is rewarding, develops opportunities for friendships, and encourages students to stay involved in debate.

Educationally. Since the beginning of this century, more than 575 experimental studies and 100 correlational studies have been conducted on cooperative learning by a variety of researchers in different subject areas and settings (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1995). Learning together has been found to increase critical thinking, foster the development of interpersonal relationships, and improve overall psychological health (Hendrix, 1999; Mills & Durden, 1992; Slavin, 1996).

According to Ruggiero (1988), it is the method of teaching, not the content studied, that determines whether or not an individual is able to think critically. Cooperative learning is an excellent way to promote critical thinking because it is a method that involves structured discussion, emphasizes problem solving, and encourages verbal learning methods that enhance the development of metacognition (McKeachie, 1988). Extensive research supports the claim that cooperative learning enhances critical thinking (Johnson & Johnson, 1995; McKeachie, 1988; Newmann & Thompson, 1987). Cooperative learning promotes the development of interpersonal relationships and interpersonal skills because it exposes students to perspectives that are different than their own (Johnson & Johnson, & Smith, 1995),

encourages students to support one another (Johnson & Johnson, 1975), and promotes pro-social behavior. Working together encourages students to get to know and trust one another, to communicate openly, to accept and support one another, and to resolve conflicts constructively. Johnson & Johnson (1995) report that cooperative learning facilitates commitment to each other's learning and reductions in absenteeism.

Beyond the development of critical thinking, interpersonal relationships, and positive psychological health, cooperative learning increases academic achievement for a number of reasons. Research in cognitive psychology (Annis, 1979) has found that if information is to be retained and integrated with other information the learner will engage in cognitive restructuring of the material. Students have to conceptualize and organize the material differently when they are learning it than when they are teaching it (Bargh & Schul, 1980).

#### Seeking Advice From Great Coaches

Debate coaches are not the only individuals who are concerned with the importance of building a successful team that will work to the benefit of the whole. Anyone who has even played little league or

participated in middle school sports has heard about the significance of teamwork from a number of athletic coaches who understand the importance of functioning as a team. For an athletic coach, teamwork is the mantra because no individual wins unless the entire team does. While this distinction makes that situation unique from policy where individual two-person teams can enjoy success, it is useful to draw upon the advice of successful coaches for ideas of how to promote team-building.

All successful college athletic coaches have spoken to the importance of team building. John Wooden, the former UCLA coaching great who won 10 NCAA titles, explains that, "No matter how great your product, if your sales department doesn't produce, you won't get the results you want. Different departments must all function well for the company to succeed. Different individuals must also function well for the departments to succeed. It takes all doing their best" (1997, p. 75). And, Penn State coaching great Joe Paterno adds, "People are surprised when I say that one of the things we talk about in a locker room is love. I just cannot adequately describe the love that permeates a good football team" (p. 130).

A number of former college athletic coaches offer specific

suggestions for increasing the teamwork. In the remainder of this article I will explore some of those specific suggestions.

Conveying the significance of the team. Former Princeton coach Pete Carril (1997) says that the importance of teamwork is something that must be continually reinforced by the coach. Most individual debaters, particularly younger debaters, will not understand the importance of the team dynamic. These debaters will only be concerned with their own success as individuals and with the progress of their own two-person team. These debaters are not likely to understand the significance of attending tournaments that they may not think will directly benefit them, of producing arguments that they will not necessarily use, of building the overall reputation of the program, and dividing resources in a way that provide appropriate opportunities for all. Coaches need to articulate the need for this to their debaters.

Provide an opportunity for each to contribute. Carril (1997) says that a coach needs to be able to find a way for each player on the team to make a contribution. Rick Pitino (1997) adds that each person must have “a significant role, not matter what it might be” (p. 39). He says that even though some of the players will always be stronger than others, if a

coach can find something that even the overall weaker players can uniquely contribute, the coach will motivate those players to work harder throughout the entire season. Since some debaters will invariably be stronger than others, each debater on the team will not succeed if success is defined solely in terms of competitive performance. In order to keep those debaters involved, it is important that coaches focus on contributions that each individual is able to make.

Build in a reward structure. Coach Wooden (1997), explains how it would be interesting to award three points to the team that successfully runs a “screen and a roll, give and go, then cuts in and makes a nice basket.” Wooden says that this is important because it rewards a team for teamwork. It is easy to imagine a similar reward structure for debate. Perhaps judges could indicate a score on the ballot how well the team works together. Factors the judge could consider include: do the partners get along, do their arguments compliment and strengthen each other, do they avoid confusion as a team, are their cross-examinations mutually reinforcing? Within the current structure coaches simply could reward the two person team that works together the best at the end of the season.

Of course, we do not want to only reward two person team collaboration, but squad-wide collaboration as well. End of season awards could be provided for those individuals who make the largest contribution to the squad throughout the year, whether it be through evidence production, scouting, helping younger debaters with skill development, or any other team building activity that the coach determines is important.

Build teamwork into recruiting. Wake basketball coach John Odom (1998, 97) and Penn State coaching great Joe Paterno (1989, 219) speak to the importance of building the importance of team building into recruiting. While the concept of recruiting is more relevant for college coaches than high school coaches, it makes some sense to recruit individuals for the team who you think are either good team players or you think you can teach to be good team players. Odom articulates the importance of recruiting players who will fit well into the team; you need a great combination. You need someone who is a team leader, a few who are just contributors, someone who will hold the team together, and someone who will cut a lot of evidence. If your whole team can only excel at one of those, it probably will not be too useful. If individuals on the team can each excel at those individually

and are great team players, the significance of the contribution is even larger.

Encouraging Punctuality. Pete Carril (1997, 106), Princeton's basketball coach for over 25 years, articulates the importance of punctuality. If people are not punctual, it delays practice/squad meetings and the team cannot work together as a whole.

Teambuilding rhetoric. Odom (1998, 118) stresses the importance of promoting team building rhetoric. He says that it is important to teach players that they need to articulate their goals in terms of the goals of the team. For example, "I want to be the best I can be so the team can be the best it can be." Working with players on their team-based rhetoric can help them keep their focus on the team. Debate coaches need to not only promote team building verbally, but try to instill teambuilding rhetoric as a part of everyday conversation.

## Conclusion

Developing a squad that works well together will take a substantial amount of effort from a conscientious coach. Some of the greatest coaches of our time have offered advice for building a team that works well together. These suggestions include conveying the significance of overall team performance to the debaters, reinforcing that through team-

focused rhetoric, finding ways for each debater to contribute, encouraging punctuality, and promoting team building in recruiting and retention. While committing to each of these suggestions will require a substantial amount of time and energy on the part of the coach, the educational and competitive benefits that will result from those efforts make the effort worthwhile.

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