



ADMINISTRATIVE

Developing a Risk Management Program



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OBJECTIVES

- To understand what risk management is and why it is relevant to coaches
- To understand the three parts of developing a risk management program for coaches
- To understand the legal qualifications or competencies that coaches should have
- To understand how the “reasonable expectations of players’ parents” are related to risk management
- To understand the management practices that will help coaches achieve their risk management objectives
- To understand the three steps coaches should take to implement their risk management program

INTRODUCTION

Coaching to the Reasonable Expectations of Your Players’ Parents

Assume that a prospective volunteer coach is interviewing for a position with a youth hockey organization. The candidate is asked to, “identify the one quality you have that distinguishes you as the best candidate for this coaching position.” If you were the prospective coach, what would your answer be?

For the inexperienced candidate, the likely answer is going to focus on past playing experience. After all, isn’t that the primary qualification of many volunteer coaches? It is not uncommon for youth coaches to assume that past playing experience is a sufficient qualification. Probably many youth sports organizations have agreed.

There is, however, a growing realization of a coaching crisis in youth sports. It is a crisis created by the failure of youth sports organizations to select coaches with better qualifications. And, it is a crisis that has been sustained by many well-intentioned coaches who did not realize that coaching is, first and foremost, effective teaching. For example, one research report estimates that more than 70% of American youth are turned off to competitive sports by age 13. The primary reasons are that the kids are tired of getting yelled at by coaches and they are given attention only if they display exceptional skills.

In other words, coaching appears to be ineffective in motivating youngsters to participate.

Motivating participation is a teaching function and should be a hiring qualification. Returning to the interview question, what quality would best distinguish a coaching candidate? It could easily be the candidate who proposes to “coach to the reasonable expectations of my kids’ parents!” Traditionally, teachers have been held to standards established by communities of parents. Youth sport coaches, as teachers, should be measured by the same standards. **The youth sports coach who understands that the requirements of the job will be measured by the reasonable expectations of his players’ parents knows that he or she must be an effective teacher.**

Coaches, in any sport, owe certain legal obligations to their players. The goal of risk management programs is to identify those legal obligations for coaches, then translate them into coaching conduct or behavior. The following are considered the minimum requirements for a standard of care.

MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS FOR STANDARD OF CARE

EFFECTIVE TEACHING

Legal Obligation: Coaches are supposed to be teachers first and foremost.

Coaching Behavior: Enroll in certification and continuing coaching education programs and start your own reading education program in coaching and communication skills.

EFFECTIVE SUPERVISION

Legal Obligation: Coaches are responsible for team supervision wherever and whenever the team meets.

Coaching Behavior: Hire competent assistants and establish a plan of supervision for all team practices, meetings, games, and other events.

EFFECTIVE REACTION TO MEDICAL EMERGENCIES

Legal Obligation: Coaches are supposed to know medical emergencies when they see them and to know how to respond quickly and responsibly.

Coaching Behavior: Take a certification course in emergency medical procedures, or at least first aid and establish a plan for prompt reaction to medical emergencies.

PROVIDING SAFE EQUIPMENT

Legal Obligation: Coaches are supposed to know how to buy, fit and maintain safe sports equipment.

Coaching Behavior: Establish equipment fitting, distribution, and maintenance plans in accordance with all manufacturer warranties, guidelines, and directions; take continuing education programs regarding equipment; and maintain records on equipment inspection and reconditioning.

PROVIDING SAFE FACILITIES

Legal Obligation: Coaches are supposed to know when field or surface conditions pose a danger to players.

Coaching Behavior: Take continuing education programs regarding facility operations and establish a plan for regular field or surface inspections, including quick repair of defects or problems.

PROVIDING SAFE TRANSPORTATION

Legal Obligation: Coaches are supposed to know how players are being transported to away games or events, and with whom the players will be traveling.

Coaching Behavior: Use the league and parents to help establish transportation plans that should include approved drivers, vehicles, and stops, and establish a team code of travel conduct.

PROVIDING DUE PROCESS

Legal Obligation: Coaches have to establish fair rules and policies and explain their reasons for suspending a player from the team.

Coaching Behavior: Use the league and parents to establish rules and policies regarding team conduct, provide written copies of rules and policies to players and their parents, and never suspend a player without giving the player and his parents the chance to explain their conduct.

PROVIDING COMPETENT ASSISTANTS

Legal Obligation: Coaches are supposed to hire or assign assistant coaches who are as competent as the head coach.

Coaching Behavior: Start a training program just for the assistant coaches, plan and organize the staff with continuing education and training as a requirement and require references from all assistants.

DEVELOPING A RISK MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

Coaching can be very frustrating when it involves being constantly second-guessed. For that reason alone many coaches might prefer an evaluation standard based solely on their effort or time spent coaching. When dealing with volunteers, it seems more fair to be evaluated on one's willingness to work with kids. The problem is that risk management cannot be successful if it measures effort alone. A successful risk management program has to evaluate coaching performance as "effective teaching."

Volunteer coaches who accept the teaching role also accept the role of a parent. And, thereby, they assume the standards of effective teaching. **Parents have the right to assume the coach has the ability to teach the sport or activity, to teach it safely and to teach it with the participation of their child in mind.** Obviously, it is expected that the experience will be fun. Those are the desired characteristics of an effective coaching risk management program.

Some risk management programs have been developed simply by identifying the legal competencies expected of coaches. The premise is that when a coach practices those legal competencies, it results in an effective risk management program.

The problem is that merely identifying coaching competencies does not mean a coach knows how to practice or utilize them. Using “effective teaching according to the reasonable expectations of players’ parents” as the risk management mission, we will develop the coaches’ risk management program in three steps. First, we will identify the legal competencies required of coaches. Second, we will integrate those competencies into a management program. Third, we will offer three suggestions as to how to implement the management program into an effective coaching risk management plan.

THE LEGAL COMPETENCIES EXPECTED OF COACHES

Legal experts have identified as many as 12, and as few as five, legal competencies expected of coaches at any level of participation. All agree that the foundation of coaching competency is effective teaching. This program suggests that coaches consider eight additional competencies:

- effective supervision
- effective reaction to medical emergencies
- providing safe equipment
- providing safe facilities
- safe transportation
- matching players according to size, skill, and maturity
- providing “due process”
- providing competent assistants

Effective Teaching or Instruction

This competency has been extensively reviewed in the first section of the chapter. It is important that coaches realize this competency is inclusive. That means many of the competencies we will discuss naturally flow from effective teaching. In other words, the effective teacher knows that instruction means a great deal more than teaching plays or conducting drills. The youth sports coach has to learn that this competency demands a great deal of sensitivity, compassion, and patience and some specific non-instructional abilities.

Effective Supervision

Effective teaching includes the supervision of players. Effective coaching supervision has two primary components: when to supervise and how to supervise.

When to Supervise

Supervision is not strictly limited to the ice or to practice time. Supervision may be required when parents are late to pick up kids after practice. It may be required when kids are being transported under the coach’s direction to a game or practice. Or, it may be required during a team picnic off the playing area. Any team function that players are required to attend must be supervised. Coaches need to also be prepared, however, to supervise those functions at which attendance is optional, or even at which the team just happened to be present without parental supervision. The coach is expected to know that greater supervision may be needed before and after practice, as well as when players are coming to or leaving practice. In hockey, one of the more obvious supervision problems occurs when players fail to leave the ice before the Zamboni starts cleaning the ice.

Based on our risk management mission, the risk-conscious coach will not wonder if there is a responsibility to supervise in a particular instance. Rather, he or she will act according to whether, “it is reasonable for my players’ parents to expect that I will supervise in this instance.”

How to Supervise

There are three elements involved in “how to” supervise players. The first is having a sufficient number of assistants to supervise. If the program provides assistant coaches, then this may not be a major problem unless the coaching staff’s attention is solely directed to the area of activity. The greatest need for supervision usually occurs with players not directly involved with the activity, or who are away from the center of activity. Parents expect there will be sufficient help to supervise their youngsters during any phase of the activity.

The second element is location. **This means that the staff is located on and around the playing area where they can see, and readily react to, any situations requiring supervision.** As noted

before, supervision is not limited to the playing area. Location and accessibility of supervisors includes locker rooms, showers and toilets, or other areas where team members are likely to congregate.

The final element is competence. One of the coaching competencies we will discuss is providing competent personnel. **It is reasonable for parents to expect that coaching assistants or aides are as well-qualified as the coach.** It is not unreasonable for parents to expect their children to be supervised by a competent staff.

The failure to reasonably supervise is the primary allegation in most personal injury lawsuits filed against coaches and sports administrators. Our society has a deep-seeded belief that player injuries would not occur if proper supervision is provided. That surely is the attitude of many parents, whether their children's injuries were activity-related or caused by some risk other than hockey.

Effective Reaction to Medical Emergency

Ideally, coaches should be certified in emergency medical treatment, or at least in first aid. Most injuries occur during practice, and safety experts have come to realize that qualified medical personnel are usually not available during the periods of greatest risk. **Several states now require that coaches have some minimal certification in emergency medical procedures.** Youth sports organizations and coaches should check for any local and state requirements regarding availability of medical personnel.

Parents expect that the coaching staff can recognize a medical emergency when it occurs. They also expect the coach to have a plan that can be immediately implemented to deal with the emergency.

There should be a plan for notifying emergency care providers, for providing emergency medical transportation promptly and for notifying a player's parents and family physician as soon as possible. Clearly, a coach would be well-advised to have signed medical consent forms as well as appropriate addresses and phone numbers available at all times. USA Hockey's risk management recommends the use of cellular phones be considered.

Providing Safe Equipment

Teaching a sport or activity means that the teacher knows how to use the tools of the trade. There are a number of factors that coaches have to consider with equipment.

First, if the coach is directly involved in the purchase or approval of equipment, or has agreed to exclusively utilize a certain manufacturer's equipment, then the coach may have assumed the same legal responsibility as the manufacturer. This is referred to as products liability. It means that liability can attach to the coach for any equipment that is defectively designed or manufactured. That is why USA Hockey works closely with HECC on certifying equipment.

In most instances, however, providing safe equipment means the coach should make sure that it fits each player correctly, that equipment is worn during activity and that the coach knows how to properly re-condition and store equipment. **Plainly, it is expected that coaches will instruct their players on the proper means of equipment care and will watch for the misuse or abuse of equipment.**

A good coaching practice is to thoroughly read manufacturer instructions and guidelines. A coach can usually rely on those directions for maintenance or repair problems. Local youth leagues or associations can usually identify trade associations and journals that will provide up-to-date information regarding equipment use for their coaches.

Providing Safe Facilities

Providing safe facilities is similar to the safe equipment competency. It is based on a coach's ability to recognize dangerous playing surfaces and conditions. **Players should not be subjected to the risk of injury from improperly maintained ice, from unsafe glass and dasher boards, or even from poor air quality.** A coach should have a knowledge of maintenance and repair processes. For example, coaches should learn about common problems with ice surfaces, protective barriers, and refrigerants.

Coaches are expected to recognize when there is a need for facility repair. It means that the coach will not allow play until the condition or defect is repaired. Some years ago during the first period of a college hockey game, a pane of glass on top of a dasher board shattered. When replacement glass

could not immediately be installed, the game was permitted to continue until the end of the period. The threat of injury to the spectators and the players was obvious. **The potential liability for any injury extended from the referees to the coaches who should have known better than to allow the game to continue.**

Transportation

Generally, there is not an obligation to provide transportation. Often, however, coaches find themselves planning or organizing their team's transportation. In those cases, coaches may assume the obligation to plan a safe means of transportation. While the type and condition of the transportation vehicle is important, the more critical consideration for the coach is knowing and approving who will drive team members. The major liability problem here is insurance coverage for the team. In many states, players who travel with friends or other team members by private arrangements may not be covered for personal injury due to the strict limitations of guest driving statutes. It is a good idea to have an organizational plan or policy that specifies who is permitted to drive the team or, if available, which vehicles are to be used. Parental input should be included in any policy regarding transportation. Finally, it is important that the automobile insurance policies of the parents, coaches, and the youth sports organization be reviewed to determine where liability and medical coverage will be provided.

Matching Players According to Size, Skill, and Maturity

This competency has been addressed in the first part of the chapter, but it bears repetition. Good teaching requires coaches to advise their players of the risks of injury common to hockey. Implicit in that instruction is the condition that coaches will not match inexperienced players against experienced players in drills in which the experienced players will have an advantage due to their experience. The same prohibition is true for size and weight as well. **Basically, this coaching competency recognizes that safe contact drills and exercises are an important part of effective teaching.** It also recognizes that parents reasonably expect their inexperienced child will not face undue risks while learning hockey.

Due Process

This is not easily accepted by many coaches as a competency. To a great extent, coaching has adopted the military style of command and leadership as the basis for its management method. In other words, providing reasons or explanations for coaching instructions are characteristic of the profession. Of course, due process is also perceived as a legal tactic encompassing attorneys and second-guessing.

In fact, due process is an effective teaching method. It does not interfere with the decision-making process, but it provides a level-headed approach to enforcement of rules and procedures. It does not mandate a forum where players will be represented by a lawyer. Simply stated, due process merely means that before a player is to be suspended for a game or from the team, the coach will explain what rule was violated and give the player the opportunity to explain his or her conduct. Due process requires that team rules have a legitimate instructional or supervisory purpose and that the coach will enforce the rules fairly and consistently. Due process does not hinder a coach's right to discipline or to require adherence to team rules. **Due process merely means that a coach will be fair with the establishment and enforcement of team rules, which is another reasonable parental expectation.**

Competent Personnel

Parents have the right to expect that assistant coaches or aides are competent. If teaching and supervision will be shared by more than just the head coach, then coaching competency requires that assistants be as competent as the head coach.

This obligates coaches to do three things: first, to recruit and select competent assistants; second, to plan a good training program for assistants that emphasizes the goals and objectives of the instructional program; and finally, to perform a competency evaluation of assistants. It is common knowledge that getting good assistants can be a difficult chore. However, it is an easier task than facing legal liability for failing to provide capable personnel. Coaches are urged to check the references on all assistants, and to plan and implement comprehensive training programs. USA Hockey provides coaching education programs for interested coaching staffs.

THE “MANAGEMENT” PROGRAM FOR COACHING RISK MANAGEMENT

The basic functions of organizational management are planning, organizing, staffing, leading, and evaluating. They are important to risk management because they help establish a competency program for the types of legal risks we identified.

Effective management, like effective teaching, begins with goals and objectives. The processes of planning, organizing, staffing, leading, and evaluating depend on established goals and objectives. They are enhancing kids’ physical skills, teaching kids how to learn, and establishing good social behavior. **It is important to remember that winning was not identified as a primary coaching goal.** Unfortunately, in this day and age, winning is often mistaken as the primary goal of sport. However, just as the business organization risks its health by concentrating only on short-term profits, youth sports risks its credibility if it cannot see beyond winning.

The three goals specified (physical, mental, and social) are valuable because they not only serve as a foundation for sport, but they represent what most parents expect from their children’s participation in sport. Parents expect youth sport to instill confidence, teach sportsmanship, develop physical skill, and provide fun. The three goals of sport do just that.

Planning

As noted, effective teaching requires planning. Using the three goals as a basis, a coach should plan how he or she is going to achieve those goals. A good teacher utilizes a lesson plan and a syllabus for achieving teaching goals. The effective coach should have a lesson plan that charts a path for players to achieve team and personal goals. A prudent coach will have plans for supervision, plans for reacting to medical emergencies, and plans for transportation issues. Planning is a critical function in personnel competency, and the planning process can be utilized as a valuable tool for training assistant coaches. From a parental point of view, most would expect that the coach has established goals or guidelines for the team and for their children.

Organization

Most organizations realize that establishing goals and objectives has little effect if the structure of the organization is not designed to meet them. Since the goals we have identified in the first part of the chapter are generally recognized in sport, you will not find many diverse organizational structures in youth sports. Many organizations have structured themselves along the traditional lines of the military command structure. A means of ensuring that your team’s organizational structure is effective is to examine how well you communicate the goals and objectives. For example, how well a coach has planned can be gauged by the feedback of players and parents. Organizational effectiveness can be gauged by team and parental feedback regarding communication within the team structure.

Staffing

This again refers to the competent personnel issue. Since physical, mental, and social goals of sport serve as the basis for your planning and organization, they also determine whom you should select. Will a candidate who sees winning as the primary goal of sport be a person who is likely to fit within the team organization? We already realize that planning and organization issues have to match the goals that have been established. From a staffing point of view, a coach is much better off accepting assistants who share the same goals and objectives.

Leading

This management function looks at leadership from two sides. First, why do people in an organization follow a leader? Second, how does a leader motivate people to perform with their best effort. There is no trick to understanding how this function works. When parents recognize that the coach can help their children achieve goals that the parents believe are important, they will support the program. When players see that their participation is more important to the coach than merely winning or losing, they will follow the program. Finally, when a coach, like the effective teacher, can show how those goals help the players become better, they will be motivated to perform better. Again, the emphasis is on the goals and objectives. A coaching manner may be charismatic, or it may be relatively passive. **Whatever manner or method is used to coach a team,**

adherence to goals and objectives will be the mark of the good leader.

Evaluating

This management function is really called controlling. However, that term does not best describe the function. The purpose of controlling is to evaluate or measure how successful an organization has been in accomplishing its goals and objectives. Some coaches will measure success based on winning and losing percentages. Other coaches, like effective teachers, will measure success on the basis of retention. That is, did most of the kids retain an interest in the sport and return to play the next season. **In risk management, the measure of success is the safety of the program.**

Again, this function is based on the physical, mental, and social goals of sport. From a risk management perspective, when an evaluation indicates that these goals have been largely met, then it is a good and safe indication that the coaching risk management program has been effective. By the same token, you cannot assume a coaching risk management program has been effective if winning is the only measure of success.

IMPLEMENTING THE COACHING RISK MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

Implementing is the most difficult part of any management program. Many people who consider themselves “idea people” lack the ability to execute their plans. Experience persistently reminds us that ideas have little value if there is no capability to implement them.

We know that risk management starts with risk identification. Risk identification, however, has little effect in a risk management program if the program itself is not properly implemented. In coaching, however, all coaches have to be risk managers. They cannot leave that function to others. That means that all coaches must have the ability to implement risk management goals and objectives.

There are three essential elements in the successful implementation of a risk management program: communication, working through people, and accepting change.

Communication

Like most of us, coaches probably would not admit that they don’t communicate well. As a matter of fact, many coaches exaggerate their oral communication skills. Since coaches rarely have their writing critiqued, many might also assume that their writing skills are satisfactory. The reason for these false assumptions is that people believe that effective communication is in the message itself. In other words, if what is spoken or written is good, then the communication is good.

We now know, of course, that the key to effective communication in any organization is not the message, but the receiver. If the message is not received and understood by the receiver, the communication has been ineffective. Coaching communication is compounded by the different ages, backgrounds, and experiences of other coaches and players. Therefore, it takes a very strong and understanding effort by a coach to be an effective communicator. The first step is to learn how to listen.

Be an Emotional Listener

The first lesson for the coach who wants to improve his or her organizational communication skills is to become a more effective listener. According to organizational management experts, there are two types of listening: rational listening and emotional listening. Most of us are rational listeners. That means that we tend to evaluate or judge what others have said to us. It is exemplified by our responses, which either agree or disagree with what the speaker said. The rational listener judges others’ communication, and is not prepared to change his mind or behavior as a result of what the speaker said. Emotional listening, on the other hand, means that you view things strictly from the speaker’s point of view. It means that you can be influenced to change your mind or behavior. For the coach, it means that he or she puts himself or herself in the shoes of the speaker, whether assistant coach or player. This is a tough characteristic to learn because most of us are more interested in communication as it affects us, not as it affects the speaker.

Effective Teaching Requires Emotional Listening

The effective teacher knows that children see and understand things in different ways than adults. The

teacher who is an emotional listener views things from the child's perspective. It is that ability that enables the effective teacher to communicate with children. The first step in effective communication for the coach is not speaking or sending a message; rather it is learning how to listen.

Teamwork: The Ability to Work through People

Another organizational concept that has proved successful is teamwork. Teamwork, of course, is recognized as a critical element of success in sports. It is a quality upon which many coaches evaluate their team's performance. Also, it is a personal characteristic that coaches look for in their players. Unfortunately, it is not always clear that coaches understand how to build teamwork, or how to participate as a team member.

Effective Teamwork Requires Commitment to Training

A goal of teamwork is to make your members as good as they can be and to help them develop a feeling of satisfaction in what they do. Often, that goal depends on a leader's commitment to training. Today's effective organizations emphasize continuous training for their members, as well as cross-training to help members develop new skills and specialties.

Training is not merely something one learns to start a job or a sport. It is a way of working; it never ends. It is a commitment that requires a willingness to train, retrain, and then train some more. Do the training practices of organizations have a place in youth sports? If organizations know that teamwork based on a commitment to training creates job satisfaction, it's safe to assume that player satisfaction and retention will result from the same commitment to training. Can coaches become committed to that concept? It is difficult to gauge. For example, coaches often respond to losses in the following ways: "We did not execute," or, "We need to work harder," or, "We weren't ready to play." The blame is placed on the failure of the players rather than the coach. It would be novel to hear a coach say, "I did a lousy job of calling plays," or, "My gameplan was bad," or, "I choked and lost the game for us."

Successful organizations know failures in team performance usually reflect problems at the top, not

the bottom. Likewise, the coaching commitment to training would require that coach to reflect on team performance from the top first. The training ethic is intended to make assistant coaches more competent, help players continuously improve, and thereby create a sense of team satisfaction. If the training program is not doing that, the coach needs to first evaluate his or her performance. As noted, however, the popular excuse is that poor team performance is a result of player failure, not coaching failure.

Effective Teamwork Requires Emotional Listening

Working through people, like communication, requires emotional listening. Teamwork and the training ethic are based on the willingness to listen. Effective training requires input and feedback from the participants. A coach, therefore, must be an emotional listener to recognize whether or not the training is working. If the coach does not actively listen, it means the coach is making his or her own assumptions about the team. That is how the blame game starts.

The basis of teamwork is the capability to influence others, adapt to others, and be influenced by others. It is easy to see that emotional listening is its foundation.

The Ability to Accept Change

Many coaches model their coaching style on their own experiences. In management, it is an axiom that we manage as we were managed. In sport, many coaches coach as they were coached. There is nothing wrong with adopting some of your past experiences in sport. After all, the principal objectives (mental, physical, and social) are time-honored values. However, the effective teacher realizes that teaching those values requires change and adaption. The ability to change does not mean that you sacrifice values, it means you learn how to teach them more effectively than before.

Unfortunately, it is not easy to change even when team performance may be at stake. If your coaching experience is rooted in rational listening, as opposed to emotional listening, and team direction has always been simply left to the determination of the coach, then change will be difficult. Coaches, however, should consider that they utilize change

all of the time. For example, any time a coach makes a defensive or offensive adjustment, that is an organizational change because it affects how other coaches and players perceive their roles. Any special preparations for a specific opponent are changes. While many coaches may fear to change how they coach, they are, nevertheless, engaged in change and its effects every day.

The effective teacher seeks change. He or she is constantly searching for new methods and approaches to teaching. The effective teacher knows that “effective” is not a stationary concept. Effectiveness requires constant evaluation. Similarly, the coach must be able to adapt his or her methods in order to remain effective. And, the coach must be able to recognize that the role of sports has changed just as the players’ abilities have.