

The Normative Coach: Changing the Paradigm

A System for Creating a Winning Culture in Your “Organization”

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■ Introduction

What’s the difference between a winning and losing team? The coaching? The quality of the athletes? The chemistry of the players? The difficulty of its’ schedule? The Xs and Os of the system the coach uses on game day? The amount of money allocated for equipment and/or resources? All of the above do have an influence, however, the key variable that pull all of these variables together is the team’s *normative culture*.

On every team, there are really two organizations that operate simultaneously. The formal organization is what is committed to writing and represents what is supposed to happen. The informal, or normative organization, is what really happens and it dictates *the way we do things around here*. A coach’s ability to go beyond the Xs and Os in knowing **how to** pull these elements together in building the team’s culture, will definitely have an *intangible edge* at game time over the competition.

Good coaches have an intuitive understanding of how to build a solid culture on a team. These are the coaches who take losing programs and can turn them around in a matter of a few seasons. Once the culture is changed, it should be able to sustain itself over the years because of the consistency in the application of the “normative concepts” that are used by the leadership in maintaining the system. While athletes come and go, the system remains the same and the results, over time, are consistency, quality and winning.

Coaches today have additional variables they must manage outside of their regular coaching responsibilities. Negative attitudes and behaviors exhibited by players, both on and off the field, have become more and more of a distraction for coaches. Interpersonal conflict among players can have a devastating effect upon the overall team’s ability to focus on playing as a team. The *whiners*, the *prima donnas*, the *finger-pointers* and the *self-centered superstars*, can exhibit their negative behaviors at any given time, and it pits them against the more mature, positive players who just want to do their job and focus on winning games.

Coaches must learn to operate under a new paradigm. They must learn to see themselves as the Chief Executive Officers (CEO) of their organization and as such, they must be more effective in managing their teams. It is in understanding and applying the management system used in building a successful organizational culture that enables a coach to fix the real problems and create a winning culture. The following is an example of how an intuitive use of normative concepts turned around a team.

■ A Championship Experience: The Beginning

I played high school football at Pittsburgh’s Central Catholic. I had hoped to continue playing football in college at Central Connecticut State college, but through a series of unfortunate circumstances, these plans never materialized. So, plan “B” was to attend Duquesne University, a small, private school in Pittsburgh. Duquesne was a Division I basketball school

and had dropped its' football program in 1951. When I walked on campus to attend my freshman orientation program in August of 1969, I was surprised to see a football team in the midst of a scrimmage. I soon learned that Duquesne had revived its' football program as a club sport. I decided to concentrate on my academics this first year and try out for the team the following year.

In August, 1970, I reported for fall camp in great shape and scared. I was about to play college football. Dan McCann was the new coach. He brought a vision and enthusiasm for bringing football back to Duquesne. The returning players were big and had a year's experience under their belt. I soon discovered that I was probably the player who was in the best shape. This, however, caused me to become the recipient of negative peer pressure. At practice, I hustled between the various stations on the field, ran full speed when running my patterns and in completing sprints at the end of practice. Giving 100% at all times was what I was taught, but that was not the expectation for how most players did things on the team. Finally, when the player who was the "informal" leader on the team saw that I really wasn't trying to make people look bad, but just trying to make the team, the pressure subsided.

We were 4-3-1 our first season under McCann. The next season, we posted a 4-4 record. We averaged approximately 25 players per season. Some were pretty talented, however, they didn't have the right attitude. Some looked for reasons to miss practice by scheduling classes in the late afternoon. Some were just lazy and gave only the minimum effort at practice. There was a core of about six, talented sophomores and juniors who continued to work hard and hustle at practice despite subtle, negative pressure from other players. McCann used us as the foundation for building the program. In 1972, after adding a few more talented recruits, things changed.

A new attitude settled into the team. Around here, everyone showed up to practice every day and it was expected that you gave 100% at all times. Instead of pointing fingers and arguing when someone made a mistake, you encouraged him to do better next time. That season, we were ranked #1 in the National Club Football Association until losing an away game late in the season on a few questionable calls. My senior year ended with a 7-1 record and a #3 ranking. With one season worth of eligibility left, I decided to drop out of school for the spring semester and finish in the fall.

We resumed our winning ways in the fall of '73. The teamwork and comradery on the team was great. As upperclassmen, we set high standards for the new players to adhere to, both on and off the field. You were expected to exhibit class and good sportsmanship at all times. We never thought about losing. We eventually were ranked #1 and retained that ranking throughout the season. At 9-0, Coach McCann helped to arranged for a National Championship game to be played in Pittsburgh at Three Rivers Stadium against the #2 team, Mattatuck Community College of Waterbury, Connecticut.

We had a roster of 32 players. Mattatuck had 62. They outweighed us by at least, 20 pounds per man. They were big, fast and strong. But, November 20, 1973 was our night. We beat them 13-7 in a hard fought battle that was won with Gary McHenry intercepting a Mattatuck pass in the end zone with 25 seconds left in the game. We were 10-0 with a National Club Football Championship! As I both savored the moment and reflected upon my four year journey with the

team, I would soon learn how this experience would serve as a benchmark for my educational experience in graduate school.

■ A Normative System: The Missing Link Behind the Success

With my collegiate football career now officially over, I applied for acceptance to the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Social Work for the fall ('74) semester, and enrolled in two social work courses through Pitt's School of Continuing Education. I told the registrar I wanted to learn about kids and delinquency and she recommended a course entitled, *Normative Systems*. She assured me it was about kids. I arrived for my first class in January, 1974, wearing my National Championship jacket. The professor, Sam Ferrainola, an ex-football player, was excited to see a fellow "jock" in the school of Social Work. After attending a few classes, I soon realized that his class had nothing to do with kids or delinquency. It was about organizational culture change. He taught a business model that our class was to convert for use in a human service agency. As he spoke of the concepts of *group norms*, *peer pressure* and *changing the organizational culture*, my thoughts drifted to my football experience at Duquesne. Yes, we had some talented players. Yes, we had excellent "chemistry" on the team. Yes, we had good coaching. But, the more I learned about normative behavior, the more I began to see the "system" he spoke of, was similar to what Coach McCann used in turning around the football program at Duquesne. Although Coach McCann didn't use the normative terms, he used the normative skills intuitively.

I now understood that it was **the culture** that we had created on the team that sustained us during those tough games to be able to overcome the obstacles and eventually win the game. We were truly a team and we played like one. This "normative system" that Coach McCann created, dictated "how we did things around here" and was reinforced by peer pressure from the players. This logical, practical system that Coach McCann and other successful coaches used in turning around and building their programs, was simple to understand and easy to assimilate into any team. But more importantly, this intangible system could be taught!

FYI: From that simple beginning in 1969, Duquesne's football program has grown. After playing a few more years at the club level, it shifted to Division III and eventually, Division IAA. Under Coach Greg Gatusso, the team won seven MAAC (Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference) titles within a nine year period. In 1993, it won the Mid-major National Championship. In 2008, Duquesne entered the North East Conference (NEC) and is now offering scholarships to players. 2009 marks the 40 year anniversary of the program. (Duquesne grad, Leigh Bodden, is currently with the Detroit Lions).

■ Evolving the Model

In February of 1975, Professor Ferrainola became the executive director of the Glen Mills Schools for Boys. This is a residential treatment facility for juvenile delinquents in Concordville, PA, near Philadelphia. I followed him in December of '75 after completing my Master of Social Work degree. The normative culture concepts he taught in graduate school are what we used as administrators in turning around the culture at the school. We also applied the same concepts in building the athletic/football program.

As coaches, we set the normative expectations for the players regarding “how we will do things around here.” Although our players were committed to the school by the juvenile court for behavior problems, negative behaviors were not tolerated and were quickly challenged by the coaching staff and peers. The high expectations we had for the players soon turned into success on the field. We played other correctional facilities and the junior varsities of small, private high schools in the area. Within another year, we were playing an all junior varsity schedule of private and public schools. In 1978, we added a high school varsity and beat them. We played a varsity schedule over the next two years, adding a few prep schools to test the strength of our program.

Opposing coaches, referees and spectators would always comment about the excellent sportsmanship and respect our players exhibited at all times. After away games, we rewarded the players by stopping at nice restaurants for dinner. The first-class behavior of these “juvenile delinquents” so impressed the restaurant management and staff, that we were always invited back.

Because of our winning ways, we eventually began having trouble scheduling opponents. Then, in the winter of 1980, John Barr, our defensive back coach, had a brilliant idea. He suggested that we create a college prep program. We had the educational component already in place and this would take the athletic program to a creative, new level.

His thoughts were to recruit players who need that extra year of academic work in order to meet the college admissions requirements and they could play on a “prep” team consisting of an equal number of our “delinquents.” This would raise the athletic and academic performance level for our kids by establishing a new peer group for our kids to emulate. The prep students would also be trained in our staff, normative training model and work with our kids in the cottages as junior staff. In return, they would receive a \$200.00 per month stipend.

Pitt, Penn State, Syracuse, Ohio State and West Virginia sent potential players for us to interview for the program. Seventeen prep players were accepted to the football program and joined a select group of our court committed students for the inaugural season. Playing a schedule of both prep schools and college junior varsities, we posted a 6-1-1 record. The highlight of the season was in beating Penn State’s junior varsity, 18-0 at State College.

There was much excitement in the collegiate community regarding the success of the program. By spring of 1982, we had over 50 potential recruits for the fall season and a 10 game, Division I junior varsity schedule. However, our Board of Directors terminated the program. They were correct in pointing out that we were losing sight of our mission of helping troubled youth. So, it was back to a varsity schedule and a focus on our kids.

The varsity program continued its’ winning ways and the normative model’s influence began to expand. After coaching at Glen Mills, John Barr was hired to turn around the football program at neighboring, Downingtown High School. In a few short years, (1996) he won the Pennsylvania AAAA Championship in a title game that featured his star running back, Aaron Harris (Penn State) against McKeesport, PA’s Brandon Short (Penn State, NY Giants). He attributes much of his success from using the normative concepts in building a strong, normative culture on his team. He is currently an assistant principal at Owen J. Roberts High School in Pottstown, PA and has been using the normative model within the public school system.

■ Changing the Paradigm

Over the past 35 years, I integrated my normative experiences, knowledge and innovations into what is today, my *Normative Leadership* model. I have patiently continued to pioneer this model despite competition from the trendy organizational/management development “fads” that have touted outcomes such as “world-class customer service, quality productivity and dynamic leadership.” While the content of these programs may have been good, their effectiveness was directly related to the quality of the culture within the organization. Today, we are seeing the devastating results of “leaders” in all professions who have knowingly, or unknowingly, created cultures of corruption, politics and/or greed within their organizations. The culture is the real problem and *Normative Leadership* is the answer in turning things around.

Although many organizations have successfully integrated these simple concepts into their business, school or human service agency, coaches as a whole have been slow to embrace the model. However, those coaches who have incorporated the concepts into their leadership style have been very pleased with the results.

A Normative Coach is the architect of his/her team’s culture. Whereas, in the past, this was an intuitive skill that winning coaches exhibited, it is now a teachable system that can be strategically integrated into any team culture. It *is* the missing link that can give *your team* an intangible edge at game time.

Normative Leadership :

* A **management operating system** for changing and/or developing the team culture, powerful **people skills** for working with both group and individual behavior and a **philosophy** to guide the use of the skills.

* A **common educational experience** that can serve as a reference point for both coaches and players to use when resolving conflict on the team.

* A **bigger picture perspective** of how to manage behavioral problems more effectively outside of the traditional sports psychology model.

* A system that can also be used in changing/developing the culture in the front office, your minor league system, or athletic department. (This management system enables more consistency in how your coaches manage their individual teams within your overall organization).

To apply one of the normative skills to your current team, complete *The Force Field* exercise found on the home page of my website: www.helpathy.com.