Developing a shared identity/vision

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Developing a shared identity/vision

Benefits and pitfalls

Traci A. Statler

Good teams become great ones when the members trust each other enough to surrender the Me for the We.

Phil Jackson, Head Coach of the L.A. Lakers

What makes some teams better than others? How do certain teams, with equivalent or even reduced levels of talent, experience, or ability, consistently outperform their opponents? Clearly, the effectiveness of a team is the result of more than the collective combination of the skill levels of its individual performers. As has been established in the sport psychology literature, the characteristics of groups include the constructs of collective identity, a sense of shared purpose, structured patterns of communication and interaction, personal and task interdependence, interpersonal attraction, and a perception of the team as a collective unit (Eys, Burke, Carron, & Dennis, 2010). This chapter focuses on how the elements of collective identity and shared purpose can be developed in a team environment to enhance overall performance and improve the quality of the experience and level of satisfaction for all involved, as well as to overcome some of the more common barriers faced in this process.

When asked to reflect upon their successes, one of the more frequently cited explanations performers give for effectiveness in a team environment is the presence of team unity, harmony, or cohesion. Cohesion has been defined as “a dynamic process that is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in pursuit of its goals and objectives” (Carron, 1982, p.124). Cohesion in sport teams has repeatedly been positively associated with performance success and overall satisfaction in the experience, both in and outside of the sporting environment. Team cohesion is associated with decreased role ambiguity, decreased cognitive anxiety, increased positive affect, decreased social loafing, and increased effort (Carron, Eys, & Burke, 2007; for an in-depth review of team cohesion, see Carron, Brawley, & Widmeyer, 1998). Developing this sense of team harmony has become a priority for practitioners in team sport settings. The development of team cohesion, harmony, or unity is a dynamic process, occurring in a variety of ways, through numerous planned and unplanned activities over the span of the group’s existence. The term team-building has become synonymous with activities and initiative games intended to build aspects of team harmony such as trust, communication, leadership, and familiarity. Along with other
team-related issues presented in this section, the creation of a shared team identity or group vision can effectively contribute to this sense of overall group cohesion.

**Shared identity: establishing who we are as a team**

As described earlier, a critical element of any effective group is the perception of that group as a collective unit by its members. This perception necessitates the establishment of a shared identity – one to which each member of the group contributes and supports. In a sport team environment, a portion of this shared identity may already exist prior to the start of pre-season or the formation of that year’s team. Returning players, coaches and staff, team traditions, and existing fan-base perceptions may all contribute to the group’s existing identity. Although this existing identity is a relevant component of the current team’s identity, the addition of new players, the subtraction of players lost, or any other changes to the make-up of the group alter the current environment. Therefore, there is a need to continually reevaluate and reconstruct this shared identity any time these components change.

The simple activity of holding a team brainstorming session or group conversation centered on the idea of answering the questions, “Who are we?” and “Who do we want to be?” can serve to develop a team’s identity. Though time consuming, this activity is valuable, both to returning members of the group as well as those joining the group for the first time. For returning members, this activity serves to reinforce similarities to prior groups and clarify modifications for this new group. For newer members, this activity can help them crystallize a rich understanding of the group of which they are now a part, as well as provide an opportunity for them to contribute to the process. This understanding and individual investment additionally contributes to the new members’ investment and interpersonal attraction to the team.

**Establishing who I am as a team member, and where I fit**

In addition to establishing a team identity, it is also important to clarify where each individual player or group member fits into that collective identity. What role do they play in contributing to and enhancing the group identity? If all members actively participated in and supported the outcomes of the group brainstorming activity described above, there will likely be a sense of ownership of that identity. This sense of ownership can enhance motivation and willingness to individually contribute to reinforcing the group identity.

Before team members can contribute to the collective, they first need to determine their personal identities. An effective means of uncovering identities is through an activity similar to the group brainstorming exercise, but on an individual level. Asking the questions, “Who am I?” and “Who do I want to be?” may be too general or philosophical for many to effectively address, so Ravizza and Hanson (1994) have suggested an alternative. In their book *Heads-Up Baseball: Playing the Game One Pitch at a Time*, the authors presented some exercises and a worksheet that prompt players to answer the questions “Why do you play?” to assess personal motivations, “What type of player would you like to be?” to create tangible characteristics that players would like to emulate, and “What would you like to accomplish in your sport?” to identify specific and measurable outcomes that the players can evaluate. The results of this activity can be evaluated in concert with the results of the group identity activity to determine a level of agreement between the group and the self. This comparison may help individuals assess where they “fit” in this group environment.
With a higher perceived level of fit between self- and group identity, there is greater attachment to the group. An understanding of who one is as an individual team member and where one fits in with the collective identity of the group is essential for the development of a team identity. Members of a team have a choice – they can choose to focus on their own personal goals and identities regardless of fit, risking disharmony between self and the group, or they can choose to emphasize the elements of their individual identities that will enhance the group, making the collective more robust and solidifying this fit for the individual. In ideal circumstances, there is a strong connection between these two elements.

Shared vision: going on a mission

In concert with creating self- and team identities, an effective method of establishing a sense of team vision occurs early in a team’s formation, again preferably before the competitive season begins. “A vision not only unites team members around the task of the group but may also enhance emotional commitment” (Stevens, 2002, p. 316). This vision is often referred to as establishing the team’s mission. The existence of a cohesive team mission or plan helps give the team direction, provides a sense of collective purpose, and fosters commitment to the group’s goal. A team or group “that lacks a sense of mission often fails to perform up to its capabilities” (Ravizza & Hanson, 1994, p.13). When a team has a collective purpose in mind, its members enhance the quality of their performance.

Although some authors have argued that the team vision should come from the coaches or leaders of the team, another approach is to develop this team vision collaboratively, with all members of the group providing their input. Ravizza and Hanson (1994) suggested using an activity to help identify the group’s mission. Similar to the group identity exercise described earlier, this activity is most effective when conducted prior to the competitive season and with all members of the group present. This group brainstorming session, however, centers around questions related to what individuals, as a group, would like to accomplish during the season. Some effective guiding questions to use in this brainstorming discussion include:

- What is/are the dream goal(s) for the season?
- What is/are the realistic goal(s) for the season?
- What is it going to take for these goals to be reached:
  - over the season?
  - over the next month?
  - over the next week?
  - in today’s practice?
- What are the needed individual contributions?
- What are the barriers that may get in the way of the group’s mission?
- How will we address these obstacles?

Creating the common purpose

This activity, essentially a goal-setting session modified to incorporate the collective input of each member of the group, will help to identify and create the group’s common purpose. Starting with a discussion of the ideal long-term goal begins the conversation on a positive
note, establishing a dream vision. From this ideal, a discussion of where that dream fits with reality often sets up a prime opportunity for the group to establish clear paths of shorter-term goals that contribute to the overall mission. It is important here not to diminish the dream goal completely in favor of the realistic goal, because the dream holds powerful motivational properties. Employing the philosophy that attaining the realistic goals improves the likelihood of the dream coming to fruition is often positive and confirming.

Next, identification of what individual contributions need to occur for the attainment of those team goals helps members to begin realizing how they each can personally contribute to the team’s overall mission. During this part of the activity, it is often useful to have team members clarify what these contributions will look like. For example, if a group member identifies “going all out in practice” as a necessary behavioral component, ask the group to clarify what going all out would entail. An effective probe to elicit this response is to say, “If I were to watch tomorrow’s practice, and people were going all out, what kinds of things would I see?” Getting the group to identify tangible behaviors is also an effective tool for reinforcing and rewarding the steps toward these group goals later on because it provides a list of agreed-upon, observable behaviors against which one can compare current actions.

An open discussion of the perceived barriers to accomplishing the mission allows for collective problem-solving, which enhances a sense of team cohesion. Finally, identifying tangible plans for addressing these potential barriers generates a sense of personal responsibility and can help create collective accountability and commitment.

The effectiveness of the activity and the individual commitment to the results are reliant on each member feeling personally included and valued in the discussion. If the group members contributing are only the returning players, or the only ideas supported are those of the starters, the remaining members of the group will not have the same investment and connection to the process. “One important characteristic of team goal setting is member participation. It should be emphasized that group goal setting is more advantageous than individual goal setting, and the more people that participate, the greater the sense of ownership” (Estabrooks & Dennis, 2003, p. 105). Every effort should be made by those leading this discussion to encourage the contributions and ideas of all participants if they wish to develop a shared vision. Because there is a greater sense of ownership among the team members as a result of this mission-building activity, it is anticipated that effort and persistence to the group goals will be intensified.

**Developing the group vocabulary**

Another important element that develops out of the group identity and group mission discussions is the group vocabulary. In holding these discussions, certain words, terms, phrases, and even images will emerge directly from the members. For example, the group might indicate that one element of their mission is to put aside past performances and focus instead on the task directly ahead of them. They may refer to this focus as “playing forward.” In another part of the discussion, the idea of always “giving 100% of what you’ve got” may emerge as an important cue to reinforce effort. These words, phrases, and concepts are powerful.

Time should be taken during these discussions to arrive at operational definitions of these common terms and establish agreement as to what these ideas mean to the group. Using these terms throughout the season – on goal worksheets, in imagery scripts, on motivational messages, in team meetings – will remind members of the team vision and reinforce the collective commitment to it.
Shared vision: sustaining the mission

As with any goal-setting program, simply establishing a mission is not enough to ensure success. One must also implement it, provide support and reinforcement for it, and continually evaluate its effectiveness. The ability to sustain this group mission rests not only in the hands of the coaches or team leaders, but in the hands of each and every member of the group. If team members view their team as united concerning this collective mission, it stands to reason that they would agree with and conform to standards of behavior that are deemed acceptable to the group (Carron et al., 2007). Members of the group are responsible not only for their individual contributions to the group mission, but also for reinforcing this mission with other members of the team. If only a few players are committed to the vision, the likelihood of attaining that goal is diminished. If players only focus on their own responsibilities, the cohesion of the group decreases. Every member must feel invested and reinforced in this process.

Empowering team “buy-in”

Getting all group members on the same page with regard to the team mission and their individual roles within it can be referred to as generating team “buy-in” – getting everyone to buy into the direction and ideas that emerge from the team mission exercise. There are two main factors that must be accounted for to enhance the likelihood of this team buy-in: (a) a belief that the group can attain the goals they have set for themselves, and (b) commitment and acceptance from each member that they understand and will embrace their individual roles in attaining the mission. When either of these factors is missing, solidifying group buy-in becomes challenging.

The collective belief that the group are capable of reaching the goals they have set for themselves is related to the construct of collective efficacy, a widely recognized correlate of cohesion. Collective efficacy represents a “sense of collective competence shared among individuals when allocating, coordinating, and integrating their resources in a successful concerted response to specific situational demands” (Zaccaro, Blair, Peterson, & Zazanis, 1995, p. 309). Because the group’s mission, direction, goals, and actions flow directly from their own contributions, conducting the team identity and team mission activities and using the outcomes as the foundation for the rest of the season can increase the likelihood of generating collective efficacy.

The second required factor for buy-in is the recognition and acceptance of one’s individual role within the group. “To make a successful team, each athlete must believe he or she makes a difference. The role that each team member plays in goal attainment, and how his or her role fits into the overall vision must be clarified” (Stevens, 2002, p. 318). Team leaders should be reminded to include a broad discussion of the requirements for successful attainment of the mission, not just the requirements for the starters or key personnel. If the importance of even small contributions is emphasized from the start, new players, bench players, or others in supporting roles will be likely to feel their inputs are valued as critical components of overall success. When this reinforcement is included from the start, it may become easier for players in supporting positions to accept their roles, regardless of the size, because their contributions are relevant and valued.

An added benefit of identifying and reinforcing the use of the established team vocabulary can also contribute to this sense of buy-in. The team vocabulary reflects the wording used to identify the collective team needs, desired actions, and repercussions for failing to
uphold these ideals. When teammates, coaches, and staff regularly refer back to the words, phrases, and ideas that were generated by the team members themselves, those in the positions of power (e.g., coaches, team captains, team leaders) cannot be viewed as the bad guys. They are the needs the team identified. They are the actions the team expects. They are repercussions the team established. And because each member was present and actively involved in the discussion, each member is the team!

Green lights and red flags

It is relatively easy to maintain team buy-in, to embrace this sense of collective efficacy, to continue working away at the short-term, medium-range, and long-term goals when everything is going well – when the “green lights” are indicating everything is right. Nevertheless, not every day in practice or competition is going to be perfect. Not every day is going to give a green light. The less-than-perfect days will likely far outnumber the great ones. It is on these days when things aren’t going well and frustration seems more common than patience, when “red flags” seem to be popping up, that commitment to the responsibilities established at the start of the season need to be reinforced. When these less-than-perfect days occur, that is the time when reminders about the solutions generated during the team mission discussion addressing the plans-of-action for anticipated barriers come into play.

When everything is working according to plan, it is fairly easy to identify the steps an individual can take each day to contribute to the group’s mission. A simple tool for accomplishing this task is to have each player, at the beginning of the day’s practice or competition, ask, “What is today’s mission? What do I want to get out of today?” This daily goal should be thought of in terms of its contribution to the collective group goal. “What do I want to contribute to the group goal in today’s practice/game?” This series of questions can be used in small groups as well, with players sharing their plans for the day with other teammates. The challenge then becomes keeping this goal at the forefront throughout the day’s practice or competition. Sharing each plan with others can help, because when other people know what one is striving for, they can help keep the individual focused. Finally, at the end of practice, or after the competition has ended, time should be taken to evaluate how well athletes were able to stay true to the mission – both individual missions for the day, as well as how those missions fit in with the team mission. When a player or team is experiencing green lights, this process is fairly straightforward and relatively easy. It is when problems start occurring that the team may have to revisit the discussions borne out of the team-mission activity.

Responsibility and accountability

When team members seem to be losing sight of the elements for success required for the team mission, or seem to be straying from agreements made regarding team identity, it can be helpful to revisit the results of these earlier team discussions. An effective way of reiterating these discussions is to remind the group that they are a group, not simply a collection of individuals. Each member of the group is responsible for and to every other member of the group.

All members of any team have (at least) three levels of accountability or responsibility within the group. The first level of accountability or responsibility is to themselves as individuals. This level of accountability is about integrity, about desire and passion for the sport, and about discipline and commitment. If athletes, coaches, and support staff cannot be responsible for and to themselves, how can they expect others to be responsible
for themselves? How can they hope to help others if they cannot do the same for themselves? “Discipline and commitment are defined as putting your mission first. You do what your mission ‘says’ you should do rather than what you feel like doing. Committed athletes are driven by their purpose and not by how they happen to feel on a given day” (Ravizza & Hanson, 1994, p. 15).

Once team members commit to self-accountability, the next level becomes one of accountability to teammates. This level is about holding teammates responsible for themselves. People lose focus at times. Athletes and coaches may find themselves in situations where it is sometimes difficult to hold themselves to the levels they would hope. This is when their teammates are there to support them. The second level of responsibility or accountability is the group process of reinforcing and assisting each other in the personal and group commitments each has made to the team.

The final level of responsibility or accountability is to the coaching staff. This level should be the level of last resort. The coaching staff cannot be responsible for ensuring that all members of the team commit to their goals or that teammates are effectively supporting one another. They have far too many other issues to handle. Nevertheless, when an individual team member is struggling with this first level of self-commitment and teammates are not effectively assisting in this process, or if the coaches see a break in the group’s interpersonal support, they can provide the cues and reminders needed to get the team back on track.

Cautionary tales: pitfalls and barriers

The benefits of generating a collaborative team identity and team mission have been discussed throughout this chapter, but a full discussion of this phenomenon would be incomplete without addressing some of the potentially negative outcomes of a group vision or some of the obstacles a group may face in attempting to create them.

Not encouraging every voice

In deciding to hold these group discussions, leaders should be prepared that not everyone will feel comfortable sharing their thoughts in front of the group. Conversely, there may be some who try to monopolize the discussion by contributing more than necessary. The reality of any group discussion is that although everyone potentially has a voice, only certain members use it.

When facilitating these brainstorming discussions, it behooves those leading the discussion to solicit input from all members – seek out the players hiding in corners nodding their heads at others’ input, ask other silent players if they agree with what the last contributor said, make an effort to validate the contribution of an overly talkative member while tactfully redirecting the conversation to others. Often group members who volunteer little on their own may voice valid and insightful contributions when specifically given invitations to contribute their thoughts or when an overly vociferous member is temporarily silenced.

One activity for encouraging reserved group members to “use their voices” is through post-it note voting (S. J. Hanrahan, personal communication, October 15, 2009). Once the team has brainstormed a list of values, goals, possible strategies, or repercussions, each athlete is then given a specified number of post-it notes (e.g., three) that they then use to vote by sticking them next to the item or items they support. If they feel strongly about any one particular item, they have the option to put all three votes toward that one item (or two for
one item, with their last post-it for another item, or one post-it per item – whatever combination the athlete chooses). This activity is a quick way to get a visual representation of how the group feels about the elements of this list, without individuals having to speak in front of others. A possible variation on this activity could include allowing each person one “veto vote” (perhaps using a different color of post-it) that, although not required, would allow them the choice to indicate items with which they strongly feel they would struggle to comply or elements of the team mission with which they disagree, etc.

**Seeking honesty versus speaking the party line**

Encouraging the contributions of those members of the group who have previous experience with team missions can be beneficial because they bring a wealth of knowledge and insight into what has worked in the past and what has not. They can provide a solid base of suggestions from which to build upon or modify to reflect the current group. It is important though to strongly encourage honesty in these discussions, from all members, regardless of the popularity of responses. Saying what one knows the coach wants to hear or making suggestions that will be popular with the group, but not actually addressing the reality of the situation at hand, is “speaking the party line.” This type of false agreement, or superficial consensus, may make the brainstorming session short and amicable, but will do nothing to significantly address the needs of the team or provide suggestions for dealing with barriers and red flags that will surely confront the group at some point. Encouraging and reinforcing honesty in the discussion from the start will lead to a far better outcome overall.

**Unshared identity: when the “I” and the “We” are in conflict**

It is important to recognize that getting agreement from everyone is highly unlikely, because a team is a collection of individuals with individual motivations, goals, abilities, and commitment levels. A group or team may be able to reach a general consensus on team identity and their group’s vision or mission for the season, but there will likely be one or more members whose personal goals or identities are in conflict at some level with the group. If this conflict is extreme, the athlete, the coach, or both may consider an alternative to this individual’s participation in the group. If the conflict is low to moderate, however, the individual may choose to remain a member of the group, despite this lack of total fit or agreement. In this situation, it is useful to have a clear and truthful discussion with the individual about expectations (both the group’s expectations of the individual and the individual’s expectations of the group), roles, and commitment to the team’s mission. “Without commitment, athletes may deliberately pull against the vision because team goals may be incompatible with individual goals” (Stevens, 2002, p. 317). It is acceptable for a player to have a personal mission or identity, as long as it does not actively detract from the group. The acceptance and support for members working toward both personal and team visions concurrently may even serve to solidify their commitments to the team, because they feel personally valued and reinforced without the threat of being pressured to subvert their own needs for the good of the group.

**Investment of time, effort, and evaluation**

Developing a group identity and vision is a time-intensive process. It takes time to conduct the initial discussions, monitor progress toward the identity mission, and evaluate and
modify beliefs and behaviors that result from this process. The suggestions described in this
chapter are more than simply activities: they are season-long processes that need to be
introduced, integrated, and evaluated throughout the season or lifespan of the group. Were
initial goals unrealistic? Was the vision too simplistic? Is the group truly working toward the
mission, or are members simply speaking the party line?

For the shared identity to take hold and become a valued characteristic of each member,
it needs to be continually recognized and reinforced by the team leaders, coaches, and
administrators of the group. It will not flourish if little effort is expended after the brain-
storming activity that created it.

As with any effective goal setting program, the value of a defined team vision or mission
is only as great as the commitment to working on it. The team vision must be continually
re-evaluated and comparisons regularly made between where the team is now and where the
team said it wanted to be. Time should be designated within practice schedules to discuss
the team mission with an effort toward collective reinforcement of that mission. Without
doubt, this process takes commitment, but when effectively integrated into existing team-
development practices, it can be rewarding for all members involved. See Box 34.1 for some
take-home messages from this chapter.

Box 34.1

Take-home messages about creating a shared identity

- Team unity, harmony, and cohesion will generally improve team effectiveness
  and member satisfaction.
- Creating a shared team identity and/or group vision can contribute to overall
  group cohesion.
- Team brainstorming sessions at the start of a season, answering questions such
  as “Who are we?” and “Who do we want to be?” can be effective activities for
  establishing a group’s identity.
- Establishing an individual’s level of fit within the collective team identity is
  important for ensuring attachment to the group.
- Establishing a collective team mission and purpose, and each individual’s
  responsibility within that mission and purpose, creates commitment and per-
  sonal connection to the group goal.
- Inclusion of the perspectives of every member of the group is important for
  ensuring all members buy in to the team vision.
- Reinforcing and reiterating terms and phrases (the team vocabulary) generated
  when developing the team mission and vision is a useful tool for reminding
  group members of their commitment to the team.
- All members of a group have three levels of accountability – first to themselves,
  next to the other members of the group, and lastly to the coaches or supervisors.
- The value of a defined team mission and team identity is only as great as the
  commitment the group makes to develop, reinforce, and reevaluate it. This
  process is time-intensive, but it can reap great rewards in terms of team
  cohesion when effectively implemented.
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