

The Organizational System of Youth Lacrosse

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Introduction

Organizational systems are described as utilizing common knowledge to initiate the functionality and success of various processes within the system (Agrez & Damij, 2015). Having the ability to manage this knowledge in both official and established systems is vital as it helps to better define what knowledge is needed within the organization. Communication plays a critical role in organizational systems (Almaney, 1974). Almaney described communication as a “system binder,” linking maintenance and adaptive mechanisms together (Almany, 1974, p. 36). An organizational system is created when both these mechanisms utilize communication. The Youth Lacrosse Organization is an organizational system that incorporates various forms of communication across subsystems including hierarchal and back and forth. Though the intent of youth sports organization is to promote physical activity, positive social interactions and improved mental health, the emphasis on winning can create a negative culture and lessen the enjoyment of playing the sport (Merkel, 2013). Promoting a culture of winning has led to conflict between parents and coaches being a common occurrence. The intention of this paper is to explore how the organizational system of youth lacrosse contributes to conflicts created by adult behavior, and possible resolutions and prevention of future conflicts.

Organizational System

As an organization, USA Lacrosse focuses on creating a community of players, coaches, officials, parents, and program leaders (2024). This focus is represented in leagues across the nation, including the league being discussed. The Appendix provides a Youth Lacrosse Organization Map that focuses on members of the Youth Lacrosse community that contribute to the conflict regarding creating fair teams. Similar to most sports, youth lacrosse teams are

categorized by age. Any child under the age of 10 is not required to try out, and is automatically placed on a team. Due to increased interest and participation in recent years, our lacrosse league has had to break each age group up into two or more teams to ensure children had as much playing time as possible. Coaches are directed by the league to form teams equally with the intention of not creating an A team and a B team as skill-based teams are not allowed with these age groups. Many of our coaches are seasoned in our league, thus having an abundance of knowledge regarding a majority of the players' skillsets, level of engagement and overall experience with the sport.

While teams are formed based off of a snapshot in time, coaches do not know how each child is going to continue to develop and maintain interest in the sport throughout each season. Attitude, effort and skillset impacts the quality of the team. This applies directly to our current conflict. One team was producing better results than the other, thus leading some parents to demand teams be restructured. This request created a divide amongst parents, coaches and the lacrosse association board when trying to decipher what the best approach would be in this situation. Though the lacrosse community was created to provide "opportunities for people to enjoy the sport, learn about the game, keep participants safe and ensure everyone feels welcome," it seems the concern for winning is trumping all other reasoning (USA Lacrosse, 2024). Terson's Ted Talk discussed various problems youth sports are facing, including adults having the mentality that winning is everything, and the success of our youth coaches is determined by wins and losses (2017). This mindset is a domino effect, ultimately impacting youth athletes and the overall culture of the lacrosse community.

Conflicts and Weaknesses in the System

A culture focused on winning is formed when parents and coaches create nearly unattainable goals and expectations for young athletes (Merkle, 2013). Though negative adult behavior is now a common presence in youth sports, our youth lacrosse organization needs to reflect on how it contributes to the issue. The organization has the authority to provide rules, regulations and expectations for coach, parent and player behavior, creating an athletic triangle concept of the entire youth sport experience (Holden, et al., 2015). Each of these subsystems have a role, responsibilities and behavior that is required in order for the lacrosse community to be a success. When the adults do not uphold their duties, conflicts can arise and negatively impact young athletes.

Coaching Expectations

Expectations for coaches include providing a physically and emotionally safe setting for youth players to take part in, as well as creating developmentally suitable lacrosse experiences (Holden, et al., 2015). Coaches are required to complete the Bronze Level certification process that includes a background check, cultural competency, annual rules test, and courses in abuse prevention, cardiac care, and concussions (USA Lacrosse). There is also a Coach's Code of Conduct that each coach must sign and adhere to. The Coach's Code of Conduct includes treating all players, parents, coaches, officials, fans and opposing teams with respect and dignity. Coaches must be prepared for practices and games, support officials, support and enforce league rules and regulations, and will not encourage or take part in any behavior that is unsportsmanlike, unsafe or abusive. Consequences for not abiding by the code of conduct include verbal and written warnings, suspensions from games and tournaments, as well as suspension from coaching in the league.

While it is in the best interest of all players for coaches and parents to have a better understanding of the expectations they hold for one another, it is ultimately the coach's responsibility to find ways to communicate with parents effectively as a means to form positive relationships. Both parents and coaches have the athletes' best interests at heart. Though it can be easy for someone to put their guard up when being questioned on their intent or approach to coaching, communication can be broken if the coach does not take time to state their path (Grenny, et al., 2022). Making accusations and communicating through emotions can lead to more conflict. Coaches must take the time to state the facts, share their story and improve the results that are cared about most. In this case, it would be the athlete's overall experience playing lacrosse.

Within our youth lacrosse organization, team formation takes place after the registration window closes. Coaches are allowed to hold a practice that can be used to evaluate skills as a means to create balanced teams (Homegrown Lacrosse, 2024). There is currently no language regarding teams being restructured mid-season. The lacrosse league that our association is a member of created rules and bylaws for each specific age level, outlining that skill-ranked teams are not allowed for ages 10 and under. Rules and bylaws are made available to all stakeholders, including coaches, parents and players. It is up to the coaches to learn and apply all rules and bylaws to each team, regardless of age level. Knowing and utilizing current rules and regulations help coaches communicate effectively with parents who are questioning the process of team formation. If coaches do not know how to proceed, or language could be easily misinterpreted, the lacrosse league should be contacted for further direction. While it can be intimidating when parents are bringing up a topic as sensitive as skill-based favoritism to the organization's

attention, coaches and association board members need review all the facts before rushing to any decisions.

Parent Expectations

The expectation of parents include following the Parents' Code of Behavior that outlines not disparaging athletes, coaches or officials (Holden, et al., 2015). Parents are encouraged to attend as many lacrosse events as possible, provide reliable transportation for their athlete, as well as all equipment and uniforms needed for the sport. It is recommended that parents do not emphasize winning as more important than skill and athlete development. Most importantly, parents should encourage their athlete to have fun. When parents place an emphasis on winning and performance, young athletes may experience high levels of stress and anxiety (Merkel, 2013). The child may lose confidence and look for other activities to participate in, including quitting the sport altogether.

Communication plays a large role in the relationship between parents and children on and off the field (Grimm, et al., 2017). When parents and children are not communicating their goals and feelings to one another, conflict can occur. Though conflict can be scary, especially for a child, it can help the parent and child talk about what matters (Casperen, 2015). These goals and feelings can be shared with the coach as well as a means to work together towards a goal. When looking at the current conflict regarding fair teams, one could ask, how do the children feel about the teams? No one has asked the children how they feel, nor have the children voiced any discontent about the current teams. Do the children feel the teams are unfair, or are they all still having fun regardless if they are winning or losing? Parents presenting a demand to the lacrosse association based on a winning versus losing mentality does not reflect a child's overall well-being and interest in the sport. Focusing on winning can lead to attack and counter-attack

methodology. This approach does not help parents and coaches to focus on what matters most, which is the players.

Player Expectations

Player expectations include following the directions given by coaches, displaying good sportsmanship, attending all lacrosse events, and giving their best effort at all events (Holden, et al., 2015). It is up to the coaches to communicate expectations to players. These expectations should be based on the true motivations of why the athletes are choosing to participate in lacrosse. Across youth sports, athletes are motivated to play sports because the activity is fun, they enjoy socializing, and being challenged to improve their skills. Players feel stressed when they are yelled at by coaches, parents and fans. At the end of the season, most youth players cannot remember their win versus loss record.

Youth sports has become an organization driven by adults, focusing less on young athletes and more on their own unrealistic goals and expectations (Bremer, 2012). This has created several issues with young athletes including injuries and burnout. It is important for the athlete themselves to recognize their own perceptions of the sport, and feel valued by their parents. When children and their parents have differing views on the meaning of sport in their lives, there can be tension in the family dynamic. This can create misperceptions of one another's actions or lack there-of. The current issue with our lacrosse organization could lead to misconceptions between parents and children. Currently, children on both teams are performing to the best of their ability, and are having fun while playing. By restructuring both teams mid-season, the young athletes could feel additional pressure from their parents and coaches to perform better. This could also lead to increased competition against their own teammates as means to perform better.

Solutions to and Preventions of Conflict

The type of behavior adults portray throughout youth sports influences our children to behave in this same manner as they grow into the next generation of parents and coaches (Terson, 2017). While adults continue to have a large presence in youth sports, they have the choice to change the community's culture. By choosing to continue to be a part of youth lacrosse, adults may not be able to change or control a given situation, such as youth athlete performance (Casperen, 2015). However, coaches and parents can choose how they respond to various types of conflict. They can make things worse, or they can choose actions that produce new opportunities. There are various approaches to conflict that coaches and parents can learn how to incorporate into the youth lacrosse organization.

Improving Coach Behaviors

Coaching can be described as helping others to perform better (Noble, 2012). Noble discussed how coaching is a collaborative approach to working with others to correct poor performance, and continue improving existing skillsets (2012). Coaching takes time and skill; even coaches need coaching. Some recommendations coaches should incorporate into their approach include establishing firm expectations, and learning and implementing coaching skills. While his discussion focused on managers and leaders in the workplace, I feel Noble's discussion regarding coaching can be applied to youth sports as well. Though the lacrosse organization requires all coaches attend annual training sessions prior to the beginning of the season, there are additional steps coaches can take to improve their skillset when it comes to conflict resolution and prevention.

Beyond training, coaches could take a self-assessment to gain a better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses when handling conflict. The TKI tool is meant to help people be more aware of the choices they make, as well as others, during conflict situations (Thomas, 2002). This assessment could provide coaches guidance in how to best direct conflict situations in a constructive direction rather than destructive. There are various modes to handling conflict including competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding and accommodating. What matters is that coaches realize working through conflict is all about choices. Everyone has choices; that is why it is important to slow down and think about which mode would be most beneficial for the team. When working through the current conflict regarding fair teams, coaches and the members of the lacrosse association should discuss various approaches to take prior to making a decision. It is important for coaches to keep in mind what the intent of youth lacrosse is when working through conflicts with parents.

The primary focus of youth lacrosse is to ensure children are having fun and wanting to return the following season. In an effort to ensure young athletes are having fun, coaches try their best to form fair teams. Forming teams involves having a mindset that is considered an out of the box approach (The Arbinger Institute, 2018). When coaching, it is important to see oneself and the players as people. Parents complaining that teams not fair due to winning, or lack there-of, could be viewed as in the box thinking. Though finding ways to make the teams fair is an out of the box approach to thinking, it is the emphasis of wanting or needing to win that puts this concern in the box. There are many risks to restructuring teams that could lead to athletes not enjoying lacrosse anymore, or wanting to quit altogether. To continue utilizing the out of the box approach, coaches and members of the lacrosse association could send an anonymous survey out to all parents to see if others feel the same way. They could also ask the players how they feel

about the teams. Additional volunteers, such as high school and college players, could be invited to join practices to help with skill development. There are many ideas that coaches and the lacrosse association could come up with that does not involve restructuring the teams.

Improving Parent Behavior

The foundation for a young athlete's success begins with parent support (Holden, et al., 2015). It is important for parents and coaches to work together to foster the child's growth and development as the child pursues athletic success. While all parents want what is best for their child, there is an entire team of children that coaches are working with to improve and achieve goals. That is why it is important for parents to incorporate the unbundling approach when there is conflict (Grenny et al., 2022). The CPR method is incorporated with the unbundling approach as a means to provide people clarity and options while navigating through conflict. By taking the time to review the content, acknowledge pattern and discuss the impact the conflict is having on the coach/player/parent relationship, the root of the issue can come into focus.

Another component that can be used with the CPR method is process (Grenny et al., 2022). This allows people to lay out how communication is going to work when working through the conflict. By parents utilizing the CPR method, including process, they would be able to identify what matters most when working to resolve the conflict of unfair teams. If the parents find their primary concern is focused on their child not having fun, then that should be what the adults work to resolve. However, if the focus is regarding winning, then there needs to be a discussion between the coaches, association and parents regarding the overall purpose of youth lacrosse. When there is a constant mindset of winning at this young of an age, a toxic and negative culture can form within the team. If this is something that the parent and player do not agree with, perhaps there is another league that is better suited for them.

Beyond working to improve their relationships with coaches, parents need to step back and think about how their behavior is impacting their children. Rather than dreading challenge, parents need to start welcoming, promoting and exposing their child to adversity (Mosier, 2020). There will always be challenges in life, but it is what is learned and applied to future situations that strengthen people. Mosier pointed out that the first question parents and relatives ask young athletes after a game is, “did you win?” followed by “did you score?” (2022). If the focus of youth sports is supposed to be centered around having fun, then the first question asked should be “did you have fun?” Before restructuring teams, parents need to ask their player, “are you having fun?” This question is a reminder to parents, coaches and players that youth sports is supposed to be fun.

Conclusion

Youth sports is an organization that has become more controlled by adults, and less focused on youth athletes (Bremer, 2012). Though the focus of this discussion was about youth lacrosse, conflicts occur across various sport communities that involve coaches, parents and players. Conflict can impact youth athletes negatively, causing stress, anxiety and the desire to quit the sport altogether. While parents think their children join sports to win, children are choosing to play sports as a means to have fun. Focusing on winning can create a negative culture within the sport community. The adults involved in youth sports must realize that children are learning how to address conflict through observation. When working through conflict, each person has choices in how to address the situation. Parents and coaches must learn how to work through conflict constructively, with the intent to reach resolutions that have the youth athletes’ best interests at heart.

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Appendix

Youth Lacrosse Organization Map

