

## Creating Team Chemistry

It can be the difference between an ordinary season and an outstanding one

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Many ingredients go into the making of winning teams, such as talent, size, speed, strength and coachability. All are important, of course. But the intangible that often binds them together is known as "team chemistry." It can make the difference between an ordinary season and an outstanding one.

A baseball team may possess five players with above-average talent, but they may never go anywhere without that certain bonding of spirit and purposefulness that will enable them to work together harmoniously, dovetailing all their skills willingly and unselfishly for the common good.

Team chemistry may be described as follows:

- The ability of the players to get along with one another, to work smoothly and unselfishly under the leadership of the coaching staff.
- Each player's recognition of the specific role that he or she has in the team approach.
- Mutual feelings of loyalty and empathy for one another.
- The ability of the players to anticipate one another's moves and to blend their efforts into the team pattern.
- A strong sense of team identity coupled with total commitment to the program and coaching staff.

Given the importance of team chemistry, what can coaches do to develop and enhance it? First, they must be totally fair, motivating and clearly show their trust and liking for the players.

While some teams will come by their chemistry naturally, most will not. It will be up to the coaches to develop this crucial dimension through specific activities and practices. The following approaches may help enhance the team chemistry by fostering a sense of pride, loyalty, respect and cooperation.

- Have the team participate in a community service project, such as helping at a Habitat for Humanity site, assist in the construction of a neighborhood playground, volunteer for youth reading programs or serve with the Big Brothers and Sisters organizations, just to mention a few. Participation in such community projects can help athletes develop a special bond through a common and worthy experience.
- Practice sessions during holidays and breaks present an opportunity to create a "boot camp" kind of environment. They provide the athletes with a background of similar experiences and stories and draw the athletes together.
- Team travel, particularly overnight, has always been great for bonding. Kids have great fun sharing an adventure, eating together, learning more about one another and getting close. There is nothing like camaraderie based on shared experiences and memories.
- A coach-sponsored pretzel or pizza and soda party to watch a televised game or a video is a surefire winner. The get-together may be as simple as a meeting at the coach's home or in a school lounge. Spending time together is a key factor in the development of team chemistry.

- Have the players write down what they believe are their teammates' good points and those aspects of their person that need improvement. These statements, which do not have to be signed, should be collected by the coach and relayed to the individual players who need them. Many players are quite perceptive about both themselves and other people, and the exercise may often help boost their teammates' self-esteem and enhance team identity.
- Ask each player to perform an anonymous "random act of kindness" for a different teammate each week. Players may create their own acts of kindness or may be guided by suggestions. Their efforts can contribute much to the development of a positive feeling and cohesiveness within the team.
- Utilize a participative approach in your decision-making process. Have the athletes help you establish the team rules, penalties and rewards. Also ask them for suggestions on the choices and parameters that you have to make for the team. This will give your athletes a stronger sense of "ownership" of the team, since they helped set the rules and guidelines.
- If someone on your team needs extra help or tutoring in an academic area, assign a teammate to the job. Helping one another in nonathletic areas will have a carry-over value in terms of team chemistry. Such chemistry grows out of new-found appreciation and increased understanding among teammates.

While not all of these suggestions may work or even be suitable for your situation, they generally will do much to enhance team chemistry. As the coach, you are obligated to take advantage of anything that will promote common experiences and an understanding and appreciation for one's teammates.

That can go a long way in the development of the essential ingredient of team chemistry.