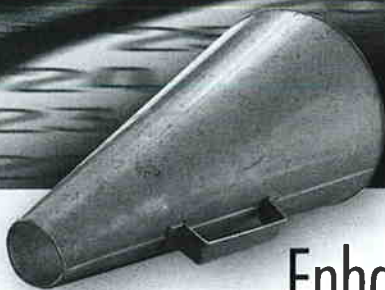




BY TIM BAULK AND VIETTA (SUE) WILSON



Coaches Voice

Enhancing Performance through Team Cohesion

It has been reported (Clavell 1983) that over 2500 years ago a philosophy in the "art of war" was that, to win, soldiers needed to act in a unified manner, be able to focus on tasks without distraction and believe in the objectives of the group. Today this philosophy may be called "cohesion".

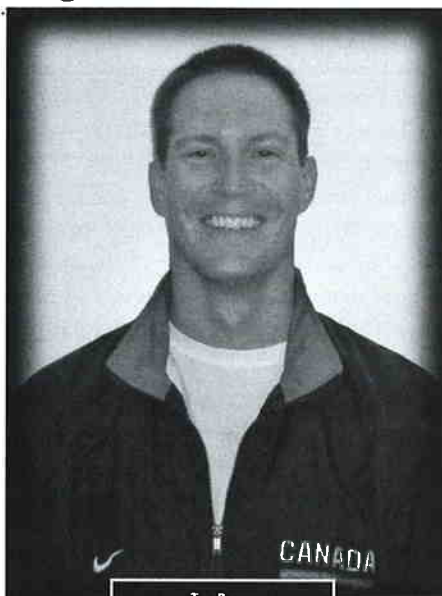
"Cohesion" is based on the Latin "*cobaesus*", meaning "stick together", and is used today to describe a dynamic process that is reflected in the tendency for a group to remain united in the pursuit of its goals or for the satisfaction of members' emotional needs. The importance of cohesion for sport teams can be seen in the expressed philosophy and management styles of successful coaches. Phil Jackson (Jackson and Delehanty 1995) uses the term "selflessness" to encourage the team to think of others, which he believes can lead to a more cohesive unit. Similarly, Michael Jordan (1994) states, "When a pressure situation presented itself, we were plugged into one another as a cohesive unit. That's why we were able to come back and win so many close games."

Noted researchers Carron and Hausenblas (1998) have suggested that cohesion should be viewed in a multidimensional model involving four interacting factors: leadership, environment, personal factors and team factors. Within their model, all these factors are intertwined. For example, the leadership of the team can affect the personal factors of the players, which in turn affect team cohesion.

This paper reviews the research literature on cohesion as it relates to performance in sport and, based on that review, suggests ways of building team cohesion.

META-ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH

In a meta-analysis of the literature (in a meta-analysis, the data from a number of studies are combined to provide a larger sample size for re-analysis, and thus there can be more confidence in the findings), Mullen and Cooper (1994)



TIM BAULK

identified two major results: First, the changes in cohesiveness that can be brought about by successful performances (task cohesion) are stronger than the changes in performance that can be brought about by cohesiveness (social cohesion). Second, there is a small, positive, but highly significant effect in the cohesiveness-performance relationship.

The concept of success contributing to team unity is not foreign to coaches, who often say that success builds a team. The findings do suggest that coaches should arrange for team success in sport-related tasks or events at the beginning of the season (for example, through careful scheduling), as it relates to high team cohesion later in the season. For coaches whose teams already have a history of good success or have a core of co-operative veterans, it may not be essential to schedule games that would result in a win early in the season. However, for new teams with players who have not been together long and for teams that have low cohesion, low confidence or low winning records, it is important to win in the preseason or early season to enhance team cohesion. Long-term

planning enhances the opportunities for developing a sense of collective efficacy that will further enhance performance.

Because of the second finding, that cohesion has a small but significant effect on performance, coaches need to implement strategies that foster team cohesion. The remainder of this article uses Carron and Hausenblas's (1998) model to summarize the research and offer practical suggestions on how cohesion can be enhanced in each of the four major areas: leadership, environment, the person and the team.

SUCCESS THROUGH COHESION

LEADERSHIP. The leader has two major functions on the team. The first function is to make sure that players work toward meeting the performance goals and objectives of the team as a unit. The second function is to encourage group harmony and satisfaction as they relate to the individual players.

Research suggests that when leaders decide that a cohesive unit is important to success and include time within the program to develop cohesion, the cohesiveness of the team does increase.

When selecting a coach for a team, it is important to select an individual who primarily uses a democratic approach (decisions made with the participation of the athletes) instead of an autocratic approach (decisions made by the coach alone) to enhance the satisfaction of the players. Women in particular prefer the democratic style, but all athletes who have a participatory role in decision making tend to have stronger feelings toward the outcome of the various objectives. Since there are no differences in the win-loss records (only in player satisfaction) of democratic coaches compared to autocratic coaches, each style could be used during the season at appropriate times. For example, if there is a limited amount of time available, such as during competitions, an authoritative style may be appropriate.



ENVIRONMENT. When players on a team are in close contact on a regular basis, such as at practices or in locker rooms before games, cohesion begins to develop. A coach can use this information to assign or rotate roommates on trips or change the players who work together on non-specific skill drills.

Research by Ryska and Cooley (1999) found that coaches from different backgrounds display different attributes, and the same is true of athletes. Thus, coaches must consider the environments from which the athletes have come as well as the environment in which the athletes are currently playing. Coaches who are familiar with the cultural influences of the athletes can build cohesion through the understanding of the team players. For example, the research revealed that American coaches tend to be more autocratic while Australian coaches tend to be more participatory (Ryska and Cooley 1999). Putting an autocratic coach into a team of athletes used to a democratic style could reduce the cohesion of the group.

PERSON. When individuals share similar personal goals and beliefs, cohesion begins to build. When a high level of cohesion is present, the individuals accept more responsibility toward the outcomes. Since athletes come from different cultures and backgrounds, it is necessary to identify or create common sport-specific or school-specific goals. The goals do not have to focus always on "the win"; rather, goals can relate to effort, school pride, the number of "takeaways" and so on.

Surprisingly, it was found that individuals who report high group cohesion also report higher levels of stress compared to individuals who perceive the group as being moderately cohesive. It is as if the people who value high cohesion take on the responsibility and stress for making the group more cohesive; they may have higher expectations of themselves for maintaining the cohesion. This finding suggests that the coach needs to be particularly aware of the stress levels of players who value high cohesiveness. If signs such as mood disturbances, reduced skill or interplayer conflict begin to interfere with a player's performance or mental health, the coach needs to refer the player to a stress management program.

TEAM. Team size is a key factor in cohesion. Studies on the influence of team size on team dynamics found that the smallest groups are able to build personal relationships based on common goals and commitment, but that team social cohesion is not achieved (Carron and Hausenblas 1998). If the teams are too large, on the other hand, task and social cohesion are also not achieved. As group size

increases, the coach may have difficulty in sending and receiving messages to and from the group, reducing player satisfaction. In turn, more demands are put on the coach, who then tends to shift from a democratic approach to a more authoritative one, further reducing cohesion. In basketball, for example, the ideal size for cohesion to develop to its fullest is with a team of 12 players.

A second problem related to size is that of "social loafing" in which there is a decrease in productivity as the number of participants increases. To counter this effect, the coach must make each player responsible for the quantity and quality of her or his performance in both practice and competition. Films of practice are ideal but not always practical, so the coach may want to ask athletes to log their own results in specific drills (e.g., number of steals and turnovers during the drill) or the coach may emphasize the importance of individual responsibility by taking 10 seconds at the end of group drills to have the athletes mentally assess their "hit rates" using a scale such as percentage of correct performances or amount of effort being high, average or low. For problem situations, the coach may ask an assistant to log each player's statistics for a particular activity and then individually discuss the statistics with the athletes.

Another team-related factor in social and task cohesion relates to the roles individuals subconsciously take on. Years ago, Bales (1966) identified that two roles emerge as a group develops: task specialist and socioemotional specialist. Lewis (1972) concluded that the two roles often overlap, and when this occurs leaders are more effective. In some sports, socioemotional roles are taken by senior players, while sport skill is usually the factor that determines who fulfils task roles. If a team has a limited amount of time to develop and cohere, a coach should select veteran athletes, who can provide both socioemotional and task leadership.

Another avenue for combining social and task skills to build a cohesive unit is the use of ropes courses or other initiative events. Such courses and events revolve around the group completion of a task, wherein the co-operation of the group is the only way in which the task can be completed. For example, a task may be to get everyone from point A to point B as fast as possible by swinging across a gully to rest on a small marker. The team members must consult each other on how to do the task, must encourage each other and finally must help each other across. Cohesion is essential to completing the task successfully.

Group norms are another factor in team cohesion. Such norms are established through

values and morals, which tend to be reinforced by rewards or punishments. Carron and Hausenblas (1998) believe there is a reciprocal relationship between the conformity to group norms and group cohesion.

Shields and colleagues (1995) define group norms as behaviours that are developed within a certain group and may involve concepts of aggression, fair play, respect for teammates and punctuality. They also contend that norms set the standard for the group and that all group members should feel that these norms are a priority. Two group norms that athletes value are a work ethic and a respect ethic. A work ethic includes such things as training in the off season, showing productivity during practice and extending effort during competition (Carron and Hausenblas 1998). Coaches should recognize and reward all behaviour that is supportive of such a work ethic. A respect ethic includes such things as punctuality, attendance and respect for each other. Again, it is vital that coaches encourage behaviours that reinforce these norms. Clear guidelines should be determined by the coach and the players, with the sanctions also specified. The coach is then responsible for ensuring that the guidelines are met.

SUMMARY

Because of the strong finding that team performance positively affects team cohesion, the coach should first strategize for enhancing team performance and then work on enhancing team cohesion through team-building exercises. Because team cohesion is a complex but important component of success in sport, coaches should implement the strategies that would have the greatest impact on their teams.

Although research indicates that performance affects cohesion more than cohesion affects performance, coaches may not be able to schedule for early success. However, with a strong cohesion-building program, the coach may be able to deliver a cohesive unit that wins late in the season to create a strong contender for post-season play. ❀

References available on request.

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