

Strategies for Highly Effective Athletic Training Education Program Directors: A Practical Approach to Interdependence

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Objective: Following *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey, this article seeks to communicate effective strategies for athletic training education Program Directors (PDs) to follow. Commentary of Covey's work and practical strategies to integrate them into PD practice and responsibilities are provided.

Background: Due to a lack of professional preparation, Program Directors often relate to what they know best—working long hours to get the job accomplished. It is not uncommon for PDs to mirror the

work schedules of clinically practicing certified athletic trainers. With this in mind, we propose approaching the role of PD using Stephen Covey's wisdom from his literary work, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Practical strategies for integrating Covey's work into a PD's daily responsibilities, as well as remaining compliant with CAATE Standard expectations, are discussed.

Key Words: Proactive, Stephen Covey, Seven Habits

Introduction

Are athletic training education Program Directors (PDs) effective? Is there a standard to which we compare ourselves? The Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE) outlines the PD's role(s) in the *Standards for the Accreditation of Entry-Level Athletic Training Education Programs* (or simply, the Standards).¹ These PD standards, areas of responsibility, and applicable "habits" are summarized in Table 1.

In a recent study by Leone and Judd, PDs were asked to respond to an inquiry regarding what, from their perspective, constitutes an effective PD.² Although responses varied in content, a striking trend was that of *uncertainty*. The questions elicited responses such as, "I wish I knew!" and, "I am not sure if I am one so I don't know if I can say how (or if I should) tell someone how to be one."²

As we ask our students to possess an ever-increasing range of knowledge, skills, competencies and proficiencies to accommodate medical reform and changing practice/job settings, the PD and athletic training education faculty must follow suit. The question becomes how to balance the many PD "responsibility hats" with a limited amount of time. These responsibilities include, in part,

developing effective teaching methods to educate students, a variety of administrative responsibilities, for some, tenure and promotion, and personal commitments.

Stephen Covey has spent the better part of 25 years researching organizational behavior and management strategies. He has interviewed and interacted with thousands of people from the general public, middle managers, and top executives in developing his theories concerning leadership and effectiveness.³ He summarized his insights in the bestselling book titled, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (Figure 1). The purpose of this paper is to explore the idea of using Covey's integrative strategies as a tool to progress the PD to become more effective in managing responsibilities.⁴



Figure 1. Graphical Representation of the Seven Habits⁵



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Table 1. CAATE Standards for the Accreditation of Entry-Level Athletic Training Education Programs (Program Director Responsibilities)

Section/ Standard	B1.2 Responsibilities of the Position and Applicable “Habits”	Application Tools and/or Suggestions
B1.21	Organization and administration of all aspects of the educational program (Begin with the end in mind, Put first things first, Synergize, Sharpen the Saw)	<u>Begin with the end in mind</u> -Determine the goals and mission of the program. What steps need to be in place to achieve your vision? What are your personal goals? What measures have you put in place to achieve those?
B1.22	Curricula planning and development (Synergize, Think win/win, Begin with the end in mind, Seek to understand then to be understood)	<u>Synergize and thin win/win</u> -As you develop and modify your curriculum, do not try to reinvent the wheel. Look around and see what other programs have established. Perhaps there are areas to be covered that would be of benefit to outsource to a different department or faculty member. It will give you somewhat of a reprieve, allow the students to interact with other people and give them a speaking opportunity.
B1.23	Fiscal and budgetary input and management as determined by the institution (Put first things first, Think win/win, Synergize)	<u>Put first things first</u> -The simplest suggestion here is to prioritize. What are your needs versus your wants? Make a list and be honest with yourself about what is truly necessary.
B1.24	Equitable distribution of educational opportunities at all clinical and classroom sites. This responsibility may be shared with a faculty member designated as clinical coordinator. However, the Program Director has the ultimate responsibility. (Synergize, Sharpen the saw, Begin with the end in mind, Think win/win, Seek first to understand then to be understood)	<u>Sharpen the saw</u> -Divide the duties according to each person’s strengths, needs, and goals. It will be a much happier place to work if people are doing what they enjoy.
B1.25	Recognizable institutional responsibility for oversight for the day-to-day operation, coordination, supervision, and evaluation of all components (academic and clinical education) of the ATEP (Synergize, Sharpen the saw, Be proactive, Put first things first)	<u>Be proactive</u> -Establish very clearly from the start what your duties are at your institution. Working without clear expectations leads to complications. Do the same for your staff requirements and student syllabi and clinical guidelines.

Section One – The “Core”

At the heart of the subject matter there exists one absolute, the human condition. Covey describes fundamentals of human effectiveness as being the, “internalization of principles and patterns of behavior that expresses his/her effectiveness or lack thereof.”⁴ Program Directors are unique in that they all share a common bond in facilitating athletic training education programs (ATEPs); however, institutional autonomy allows for the person serving in that role to take a varied approach. Fortunately or unfortunately, formalized professional preparation for athletic training education PDs is non-existent at the time of the writing of this paper. Regardless of training, the goal of all PDs is to effectively run their programs. Our goal is to provide useful strategies to aid in achievement of that goal.

PDs clearly share commonalities. It is our belief that strategies that enhance effectiveness, using the psycho behavioral concepts as advocated by Covey, may be useful. The following sections of this paper will present Covey’s approach, the “habits,” and discuss how they may be effectively integrated in a PD’s daily routine.

Section Two—the “Habits”

Be Proactive

Program Directors should challenge students to be proactive with their education and learning, their schedules and time management, and their creativity and involvement with patient care. The question becomes, “do we embrace and practice what we advocate?” In some ways, we are proactive, but, perhaps a bit too often, time constraints and overloaded schedules force us to become reactive. Occasionally, events challenge us to act outside or near the periphery of our “comfort zones.” Covey advocates that, “our response to what happens to us, may hold the critical factors that cause us harm.”⁴ Often, regardless of how much actual control we possess in a situation, we fight for control. In the world of the PD control could be administrative decisions or critiques based on self-studies. It is easy for the PD to feel overwhelmed. Time may be spent “solving” everyone’s problems, at the detriment of other issues requiring attention. Essentially, this “putting out fires” approach is reactive in nature.

Instead of working inefficiently “putting out fires”, we must learn two key things: 1) to clear the brush to prevent or limit fires, and 2) to accept situations beyond our control (i.e., move with the

striving for interdependence, collectively developing solutions and enjoying shared success.⁴

Seek First to Understand, Then to be Understood

Articulating thoughts and ideas in a relevant and meaningful manner will create the necessary inroads for success.³ A weak infrastructure of understanding is almost always doomed to fail. Listening may be the most critical of practical skills we all possess. Listening involves hearing *with the intent of understanding* and empathizing.⁴ Before prescribing change for an ATEP, understanding the unique needs of the processes and persons affected will allow for all involved to understand the change agent (i.e. Program Director).

Synergize

Although the concept of synergy is broad, its applications can be focused. One example would be allowing clinical staff to teach in the classroom while getting the academic faculty into clinical settings. Given the ever-increasing academic demands this scenario may not always be feasible. However, should an opportunity arise to work synergistically, this situation would allow for the development of professional credibility in linking theory and practice. A similar strategy involves peer teaching. It allows you to assess the knowledge of the upper level students in a controlled environment, builds student efficacy and, in a sense, a networking



Figure 4. Sample Delegation Log⁵

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As you develop the ability to think win-win, you move closer to interdependence. That movement to interdependence is a good thing. Functioning interdependently means working with people rather than against them. Performance optimization can be met by

opportunity between the students. When done well, synergy will catalyze, unify and unleash the greatest powers within people.⁴

Sharpen the Saw

The last "habit" involves a process of renewal. "Sharpening the saw" is regaining what Covey calls "productive capacity," by engaging in carefully selected recreational activities. Burnout is a common theme in athletic training both from a clinical and academic perspective.⁸⁻⁹ Renewal allows for growth, change and improvement.⁴ Covey uses the analogy of a dull saw. When we are burned out, we are working with a dull blade but trying to accomplish the same task. In essence, we are working harder with every stroke of the blade to get the job done. Rather than recognizing this and taking time to sharpen the blade, we persist with trying to make it work. We work hard, not smart.

It is very easy to fall prey to this harder not smarter process. Unfortunately, failure may serve as the sole mediator to break the dull saw cycle. Seeking balance and taking a holistic approach to being a PD, professional, mentor, family member and, most importantly, a person allows for sharpening of the saw. Being aware of changes in the profession and higher education will allow for vision and planning. Highly effective PDs are innovative, personable, hard-working, resourceful, passionate, caring and committed to the future direction of the profession and society at large.² Take some mental health time every now and then, if only for a few minutes. Take a stroll around the building. Listen to your favorite song. Do whatever it takes to make time for your well-being. Remember if you are not good to yourself then you will not be any good to anyone else. Philosophically, one could argue, accidents are the lack of planning. Taking the time to "sharpen one's saw" can assist in minimizing avoidable stress by getting tasks done efficiently and effectively versus just getting them done.

Conclusions

Program Directors incur undue amounts of stress from administrative responsibilities and program management. In only five short years, the number of ATEPs has increased fourfold creating a demand for PDs and support staff. Often, PD's effectiveness is measured vicariously via the ATEP. PDs need tools to work smarter. This article has focused on strategies the PD can implement at a personal level based on Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. We presented the seven habits and discussed how best to incorporate them into a PDs responsibilities and ATEP mission. A PD who is prepared to assume a mission with "vision" will likely act in a highly effective manner to positively impact an ATEP.

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