

## Chapter 5

# Developing Team Culture

and subcultures



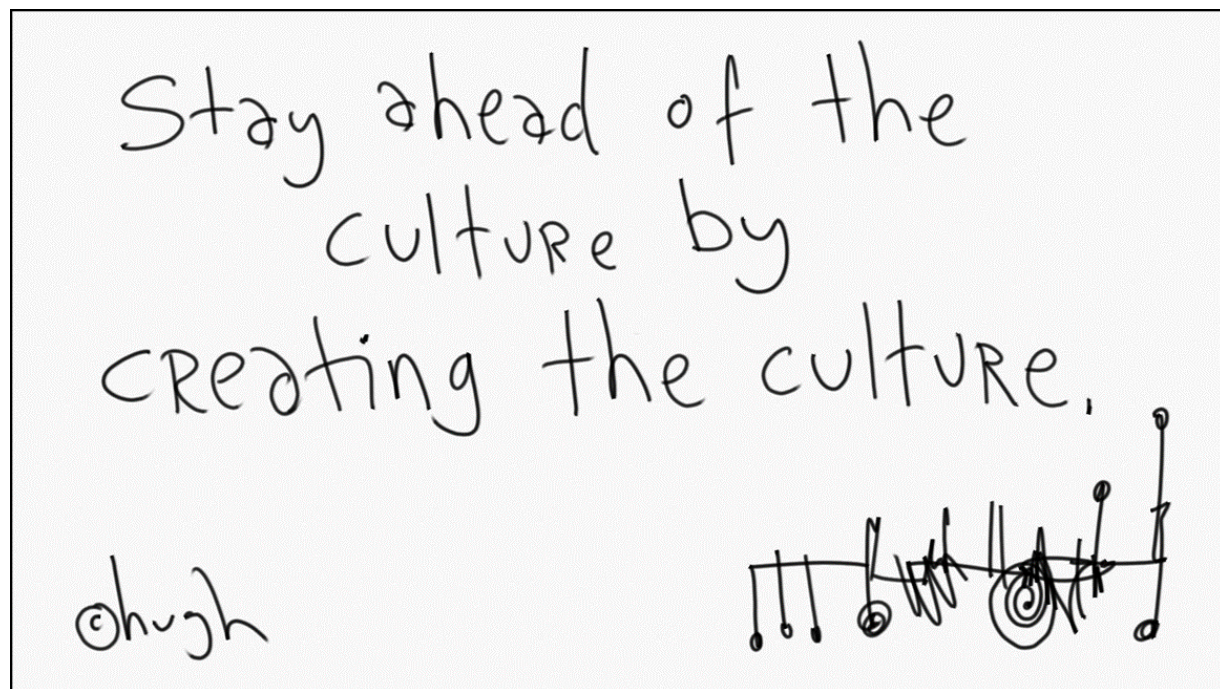
**“The common man asks what’s in it for me.  
The enlightened man asks, how can I help?” unknown**

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*“Through this team we have learned that coaches are like lighthouses, with the sources of light coming from their hearts, helping kids find their way. Very grateful that we found your program and you.” Team Parent*

## Chapter Overview

- Cultural Overview
- Cultural Assessment
- Cultural Challenges
- Culture Creation
- Subculture Creation
- Building a Character Culture
- Building a Leadership Culture
- Building a Success Culture



“Prepare the child for the path, not the path for the child.” unknown



The culture driver and lynchpin - leadership

“Loving people live in a loving world. Hostile people live in a hostile world.  
*Same world.*” Dr. Wayne Dyer

## Culture Overview

**“The welfare of each is bound up in the welfare of all.” Helen Keller**

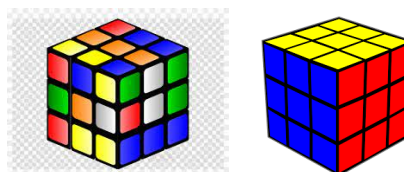
So, course-wise, you’re about halfway through. The whole professional thing was long, but deservedly so. **This topic is even more complex, and elusive.** And to tie this subject back to the course title and theme of this material, **a truly professional coach, and a well-run program, manages its culture.** Culture will either be a **headwind or a tailwind** in all that you do and all that you are trying to achieve. A keen understanding of the ingredients and influences of culture must be recognized, as culture will take on a life of its own if left unchecked.

Most coaches don't really understand their own team culture beyond, “pretty good I think”, “OK”, or “I don’t know, ask the athletes”, or even, “that’s not my thing, I just coach”. These are not good answers and leave your program, in all aspects, to forces outside of your control.



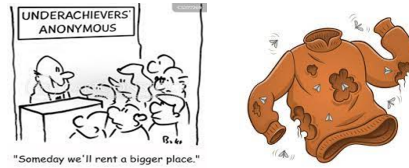
Consider culture-building as the ultimate art behind the science of swimming, with you as the artist. Every brush stroke and every color affects the outcome. And this “painting” is in constant creation. Can you create a masterpiece? **This is truly in your hands, and it will determine the experience, success, and future of your program. Again, if you want success, if you want a positive program, if you want job security, start with culture, and get acquainted with your pallet.**

Or to put it simply, good ingredients make good soup, and well, bad ingredients make bad soup, yes, with you as the chef either way. Bad attitudes, poor work ethic, selfish teammates, hostile parents can jeopardize a program. Just one bad ingredient can ruin a meal (or a team). This is irrefutable, regardless of athlete performance. We have seen this play out from local club programs to Olympic teams. All have objectives and mission statements, yet unwittingly, things can go astray. **The heavy lifting in coaching, and any organization for that matter, is in culture creation, and equally important, “ingredient” management.**



The moving pieces, or ingredients, of culture are not dissimilar to a Rubik’s Cube. Culture building can feel this way, with the colors representing subculture of attitude, effort, parents, travel, etc., and each cube represents an action or intention that either fits or doesn’t. How do you get everything (everyone) to line up? Some can do it quickly (and are adept at culture building), many struggle, and

some can't get the colors aligned no matter how much they try. And imagine every time you get close to completion, someone shifts the cubes. So it is with culture, it is daunting to begin with, and presents itself with daily challenges and disruptions.



If you are skeptical about the power of culture, realize that **the vast majority of athletes and programs underachieve to their true potential, and they tend to be OK with it.** This can come out of a lack of vision and pursuit of potential. They just accept it as status quo. Think about the unrealized achievement, success, experience, and growth left on the table. Athletes fail to develop, drift, or leave the sport, teams fold, coaches get frustrated or are let go, kids don't connect, or worse, don't care, etc. Most of this can be tied to the absence of a positive and productive team culture. Any organizational management consultant will contend that culture is the greatest determinant of success (discussed later).

And it is not just about swimming fast, or improving. **Children and young adults can, and should, be tethered to a positive and productive endeavor and group, and culture will be the primary driver.**

**Think about culture as the quintessential, “rising tide” of integrity, effort, trust, empowerment, motivation, and selflessness that lifts all boats to athletic and personal growth and achievement.**

The beginning of cultural breakdown is like a stitch coming out of a seam in your favorite shirt or dress. No big deal. But if left unattended, it becomes two, as that stitch affects the next, just as a bad action or attitude draws in the next most vulnerable teammate, and so on. One stitch becomes a visible hole in the garment (or team) and yes, it can ultimately unravel. This analogy depicts the importance of vigilance to anything that can disrupt or threaten a strong culture.

There are many coaches that believe that times and performance are all that matter, and in a narrow world (of coaching) that is true; the resume looks good, as does your team, from a distance, but like a beautiful home with a weak foundation, eventually it will give way, and the nice furniture or the artwork won't save it.

If you are fortunate to have a strong culture, either by adept leadership or deep-seated tradition; management, maintenance, and vigilance are key. If you are not so fortunate, the course can be reversed but it takes time, sincere desire, and dedicated daily effort.

While cultural strength seems like an obvious endeavor to pursue, to be fair, there are costs associated with an aggressive cultural pursuit (below). We do believe that the benefits far outweigh the costs or challenges and that **it is incumbent upon all coaches to create the most positive and productive environment possible**, one that supports performance, team environment, *and personal growth.*



The challenges are:

- it's hard
- it's very hard
- **it's all-consuming**
- you must align ALL decision-makers (staff/board, team captains, etc.)
- it requires daily vigilance
- kids will push back when it does not serve them
- parents will push back when it does not serve their children
- you don't really get paid for it
- the time committed will reduce "coaching-specific" work

Now let's look at **the benefits of a strong and inspiring culture:**

- united vision (generally)
- consistency and flow
- increased levels of performance (discussed later)
- increased levels of motivation
- swimmers who maximize their potential and their careers
- leaders and role models
- selfless teammates
- team harmony
- highly efficient workouts
- elite "athletes"
- athlete retention
- reduced burnout (below)
- increased revenue
- minimal oversight
- fewer parent issues
- highly enjoyable relationships
- people who put the team first
- people who are trusted implicitly
- healthier, happy kids
- better people
- fewer conflicts
- issue free travel
- athlete safety

*and on, and on, and on*



## Burnout and Culture



There is a gross misconception surrounding “burnout” in sports/swimming. Burnout is NOT inherent in sports, despite common assumptions. It *is* inherent in repeated negative activity. Of course, if athletes do not continue to improve they will struggle and may leave the sport. But the sport itself is not the cause. Burnout comes from doing something that is not positive, a lot, *even if* your athletes achieve success. **The pursuit of a positive, and yes, empowering culture, will not only retain athletes, but you will see that, even when they are struggling with performance, they would not consider leaving the team or the sport, as both become a life anchor.**

## Cultural Assessment

To begin with, **it is crucial to understand not only what cultures are, but why and how they exist, for better or worse.** A culture may be bad, but why is it so? Rather than simply accept them, and the status quo, understand why they are what they are, and understand their effect on the team and youth (and even on society). **It is our role, opportunity, and challenge to redefine team cultures and behavior in terms of what is right for the organization/team and right for athletics, children, and young adults.** We must then sell the benefits of a new culture, implement them, demand them, and change the paradigm. Sounds heavy, but is there anything more important to personal, athletic, or team growth and experience?

The following are **critical questions that need to be given serious and objective thought**, and ideally discussed with staff, parents, and athletes.



- How would you define your team culture?
- How has it evolved?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses?



- Who decided or decides your cultural objectives?
- How defined (to your team) is your cultural vision, if it is?
- How aggressive is the leadership's pursuit of that vision?
- Is your team culture influenced more by the institution/organization, coach, talent, social groups?
- Where does the leadership and inspiration come from – more the coach or more from the locker room?
- Are there ebbs and flows based on personalities or is there continuity?
- **How wide is the gap between your culture and a truly inspirational (in every way) team environment?**
- Does the environment add or detract from the competitiveness (success) of your team?
- Can you assess sub-cultures of:
  - effort
  - technique
  - competition
  - team orientation
  - travel
  - parents
- **What about your character culture?**
  - To what degree do you trust your group – left alone at a workout, an activity, or a hotel?
  - To what degree do the older swimmers seek to mentor?
  - To what degree do the younger swimmers seek to lead?

So to begin with, **you MUST understand your culture, and your subcultures.** You must be nearly obsessed with understanding, monitoring, and assessing this. It is the experiential version of checking the chemicals of water every day to ensure the pool's quality and the athlete's safety.

**Some general characteristics of cultural evaluation are:**

- watch with an OBJECTIVE eye
- have a standard by which you are measuring
- seek the truth
- talk to the staff
- ask a wide range of athletes, at all levels
- ask people outside of your program how it is perceived

**Things to watch for internally are:**

- athlete arrival - on time/early
- athlete attitude upon arrival (do they want to be there? are they excited?)
- body language
- eye contact
- desire to interact with staff
- athlete interaction (inclusive or segregated)
- technical focus and discipline (know and care what they are working on)

- effort in workout (**without** being asked)
- drive or motivation to be successful (in a team-centered way)
- dry land effort, focus, and maturity
- meet maturity (on time, team attire, warm-up/warm-down, attitude, resilience, help)
- team attire - is it worn often (when not required)
- deliberate focus in workout - from the warm-up on
- language (never bad and always constructive/positive)
- general respect of everyone
- locker room demeanor
- integrity in workout (counting repeats, laps, strokes, etc.)
- helping when needed
- helping without being asked
- feeling of trust with athletes
- athlete respect and support of staff
- social media use
- academic focus
- love of the sport
- goal orientation
- respect and appreciation of parents - theirs and others
- and of course, results and outcomes



## Cultural Challenges

From the article; Why is it so Hard to Become a Better Person, “The sad irony is that while goodness is the thing that we most want from everyone else, few want it most for themselves.”

After you have a realistic sense of your culture(s), it is important to understand the challenges or headwinds that will challenge your efforts. These may be different in various regions, but there are generalities (apathy, negativity, self-centeredness, ego) that challenge kids to move in the direction of being a high-level athlete and a leader/role model.

**Cultures rarely or randomly gravitate to extraordinary without a firm hand guiding them, or years of powerful tradition.** Absent those two forces, you would be gambling with the overwhelming social pressures on kids today to somehow lead to collective work ethic, integrity, compassion, and selfless team commitment. To be clear, and not too cynical, the vast majority of forces at work in the development of youth and teen mindsets are not positive and will not work in your favor. Society literally pushes in the exact opposite direction. Let's get that out of the way so we can begin the process of refocusing and rebuilding. Children and young adults do not walk onto a

pool deck in a vacuum and there is no gravitational pull to these virtues. If anything, they are outliers in youth. So that becomes the backdrop of athlete and team culture creation. Not ideal, or healthy. Let's look at some the pressures on kids today:



**“There are too many people who think that the only thing that's right is to get by, and the only thing that's wrong is to get caught.” J.C. Watts**

Social inputs ultimately create the environment that you coach in, at the outset. **The key is to transform cultural headwinds into tailwinds.** No, it is not easy. It will be the most challenging aspect of coaching, and it *will be* the most rewarding, for you and your athletes. Things kids and young adults deal with on an ongoing basis are:

- social media obsession
- peer pressure - in all forms and areas
- video games (time/content)
- destructive TV shows - vanity, conflict, language, sex, ego, etc.
- drugs/alcohol
- language (BAD)
- cheating in school (and life)
- lying (to get what they want or need)
- academic pressure
- family turmoil
- financial difficulty
- music (language, message)
- social pressure - to act and be...
- false idols - media/marketing (TV, music, etc.)
- parental pressure (too hard)
- overprotective parents (too easy)
- depression, anxiety, self-esteem, insecurity
- bullying
- struggle for acceptance
- need for “things” (to be happy)
- and the list goes on...

In a sense, what we are trying to do is to develop athletes against a societal backdrop that challenges the very core of our sport. Where in our culture do we celebrate virtues, values, and character? We would argue that **society is anything but virtue/value-based.**

**The old “masters” (teachers) are out:**

- Dalai Lama – insight
- Confucius – truth
- Jesus – forgiveness
- Gandhi – tolerance
- Lao Tzu – leadership
- Buddha – suffering
- Mohammed – service
- Mother Teresa - compassion
- Aristotle – wisdom
- Helen Keller - perseverance

**The new masters (teachers) are in:**

- Smartphones
- Facebook
- Instagram
- TickTock
- YouTube
- music
- Reality TV - driven by conflict, sex, alcohol, ego, power, etc.
- Socialites (promoting destructive values) - again, false idols
- (inappropriate) fashion - marketed aggressively



## Culture Creation

**“Change your thoughts and change your world.” Norman Vincent Peale**

When beginning the process of culture creation, you should always begin with the macro, **with the intention of:**

- cementing a common vision - a like-minded sense of “we”
- aligning all parties (staff, parents, athletes)
- developing a sense of pride in identity
- creating direction, flow, and harmony in the program
- enhancing performance, if not maximizing it
- maximizing the experience
- enjoying mutual respect and athlete safety
- having integrity in all areas - athletes, staff, and parents, etc.



### An Exercise

*(a vision of what is possible)*

(again) “A rock pile ceases to be a rock pile the moment a single person contemplates it, bearing within him the image of a cathedral.” Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Culture should begin with a vision of the **greatest version of your team and organization**. Even if you feel you have a sound culture, this exercise is valuable as it creates the contrast from where you are to where you *can* be. A version of this should be done in every area of your program (subcultures discussed later), including parents.

Close your eyes and visualize (envision) your team or your group. **Imagine an impeccable culture.** Imagine a culture of training where everybody embraces the work, they are positive and supportive, and they are focused on technique (it means a lot to them; every stroke matters). Imagine your team at competitions (what do they look like? arrive early? team attire? positive? supportive? cheer for one another?), your team traveling (team attire? impeccable integrity? always doing the right thing? spirited? supportive/inclusive?), and a parent culture (no problems or issues?, grateful? eager to help?). Imagine a character culture of implicit trust, mutual respect (and compassion), and selfless contribution to the team.

**The real work is in filling the gap between reality and vision, between status quo and what is possible.**

Assuming you have “taken the temperature” of your team culture and subcultures, have a vision for your ideal working environment, and understand the challenges, the heavy lifting begins.



- 1) First, there must be **organizational alignment on that vision**. This can be done at a general meeting or an off-site gathering. We are not getting into the character side yet, as that becomes a much steeper hill to climb (but the view is even better). The first level of understanding must come from staff and the board (parent management if a non-profit). You must agree on identity, objectives, and policies as they relate to the foundation of the program, some of which are:

- team identity
- team objectives - from competitiveness to unity and interaction
- behavioral standards
- competition policy (by group)
- attendance expectation (by group)
- group movement criteria
- effort expectation (by group)
- attire (team and general)
- discipline policy
- parent policies

This becomes the roadmap to your ultimate destination. **Without a clear and defined vision and policies or guidelines that frame those, this can be a turbulent journey.** Consider a coach new to a program that suggests each swimmer wear their team shirt to the competition. The board says no, that it should be an option. While team attire may seem trivial (it should not), it reveals a chasm of difference in philosophy, priority, and direction. Consider a coach who wants to implement a defined attendance policy (%) and the parents push back. Who wins? Consider a coach that is driven to achieve team success and the team has a history of mediocrity and lack of commitment. And even higher-level stuff, consider a coach that demands respect from athletes, i.e., no talking when the coach is communicating, or no cell phones during meetings, and kids repeatedly violate these expectations. What happens? There will either be a meeting of the minds or a break in the program at some level; coaches can be let go, families leave, etc.



- 2) Once the decision-makers are in agreement in all key areas, **the “audience” or constituents must be sold.** The word “sold” is used because the principles of culture-creation require commitment and consistency, and both swimmers and parents must see this, agree to it, and buy-in. This should be done through positive and constant communication. **Your vision and expectations must be clearly articulated in:**
  - a) all written material
  - b) clear communication to new members
  - c) being sold aggressively at the season introductory meeting with parents and swimmers
  - d) communication from board or parent management to other parents
  - e) communicating regularly through newsletters
  - f) communicating strategically to key parents (power brokers)
  - g) communicating strategically to team leaders, in all groups (athlete power brokers)
  - h) being discussed and evaluated at every staff meeting (cultural objectives)
  - i) being discussed regularly, if not daily, at training sessions

**The communication must be clear as to the values, traditions, and priorities of the team,** with the use of “we” as much as possible, i.e., “we are”, “we will”, “we... support one another, work hard, are respectful, etc.

- 3) To tie back into policy, and to close the loop from vision to communication and buy-in, there must be a clear understanding of follow-up or recourse when policy is not adhered to or cultural standards are violated. For the sake of consistency, in the example above, if, and this is an *if*, the board and staff agreed that team attire is expected at competition, and the team leaders agree, and ten swimmers show up without team attire, and their parents are communicating that they don't agree with the policy, what do you do? Firm and constructive action will reinforce the policy (and identity) and hopefully send a message to the team about “who we are”. Response that is too aggressive may create division and a negative team dynamic. This can be like threading a needle in discipline.
- 4) Finally, we would add that the greatest cultures come out of deep personal relationships with people (teammates and coaches) who care for each other at a high level. This is where the extraordinary happens and inspiring stories are created. It is the true “wind at your back” feel, or “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts”. Beyond the vision, objectives, policies, and communication, there should be an aggressive and genuine pursuit of relationship-building and of elevating growth at personal *and* athletic levels. **This effort and dedication will expedite culture-building as athletes *will want to* follow the lead of the staff.** Look to:

Care	Care deeply and personally
Support	Support current and long-term goals
Show	Show pathway to personal growth and leadership
Show	Show pathway to swimming potential (what is possible)

### Vertical and Horizontal Relationships

In relationship building, you should **be deliberate at developing relationships from two perspectives, vertically and horizontally.** Vertical means that the athletes clearly understand the hierarchy of **roles, and respect** those running the program, i.e., the coach as the authority figure. Horizontal means that a coach must **reach out to athletes as a person, as a peer in the team game, and as someone who cares, regardless of their age or their athletic contribution.** At some level they must feel this connection.



**The pinnacle of professionalism is to develop both relationships and dynamics; to be highly respected as a coach, yet to connect deeply as a person, regardless of role.**

## Subculture Creation

**“When he took the time to help the man up the mountain, lo, he scaled it himself.” Tibetan Proverb**

While culture is a general feel and tenor, it is really the collection and intersection of all aspects of the program (subcultures) that are woven together into a **cultural tapestry**.

**Subcultures can be a world unto their own.** A program may be strong in some areas and weak in others. It is possible to create a vision and standard for every aspect of the program that is important to you or the club. You then follow the same process of vision, alignment, sale/buy-in, management, and connection. Again, some of the obvious subcultures are:

- integrity/implicit trust (character)
- embraced work ethic/training focus
- positive attitude
- team support (service and compassion)
- technical focus/priority
- strong academics
- parent support
- spirit
- travel

If you want to go deep into subcultures, you can even **drill down to sub-subcultures**. Yes, these can become cultural:

- team attire
- back-half racing
- best turn technique (and under water)
- volunteerism
- dryland
- best team cheer, etc.

And despite the best efforts of coaches, the reality is the athletes (and parents) carry the balance of power in their existence or absence, but if managed adeptly, you can create critical mass in engagement and draw the majority in. **Culture and subculture will ultimately determine:**

- individual success
- team success
- athlete cohesion and unity
- retention
- coach/swimmer relationships
- integrity in workout

- integrity outside of workout
- training effort and focus
- travel success
- technical focus and achievement
- mitigating, if not eliminating, burnout (mentioned below)
- parent environment
- even athlete safety can be cultural (and come out of character and compassion)
- and let's not forget, coach satisfaction

**Culture, for better or worse, will also lead to athletes that are:**

- resilient or weak
- selfless or selfish
- givers or takers
- caring or uncaring
- patient or impatient
- respectful or disrespectful
- humble or arrogant
- connected or disconnected
- driven or apathetic
- long-term or short-term oriented

As culture in general can be nebulous, and if it isn't complicated enough, there can easily be conflicting cross-currents among subcultures, i.e., it is not black and white, such as:

- athletes attendance is poor but the kids are very respectful
- athletes work very hard but are poor role models (bad behavior)
- kids are fast swimmers but technique focus is ignored
- kid love the team but are not competitive and don't attend meets
- kids are amazing students but not serious about swimming (school comes first)
- kids are nice and respectful but do what their parents tell them regarding the team
- kids work hard but race poorly
- kids are spirited and love the team but are disrespectful to coaches
- etc., etc.

This ties back to the **Rubik's Cube of colors (subcultures) and squares (issues that either align or not)**. Do you remove someone from the team if they are a bad teammate but an elite swimmer? Do you move someone up to a higher group because they are exemplary even if they are below the group standard. These machinations are endless. **Again, the pursuit of aggressive subcultures will mitigate those that stray from the vision or pursuit.** It is the upward pull of:

- "We work hard and take pride in our effort."
- "Our team places integrity above all else and is respectful to all."
- "We focus on technical details and pride ourselves on our efficiency in the water."
- "We care for and support one another - we are a swimming family."
- "We have an extraordinary parent group."
- "We are spirited in competition."

## Building a Character Culture

“Success is always temporary. When all is said and done, the only thing you'll have left is your character.” Vince Gill

You might wonder where this fits into coaching, swimming, winning, etc. Could you entertain that it could be the lynchpin to all of it, the true foundation of ALL SUBCULTURES. It can also be viewed as the lubricant to every aspect of your program. Would high-character athletes work harder, focus more, care more, help more, lead more, mentor more, be trusted more? There is a high likelihood of yes to all, especially if you link integrity to the aforementioned traits. Too many coaches overlook this “elephant in the room” and deal with the fallout of cultural breakdown, behavioral issues, or challenges to performance. Again, character is truly a “wind at your back” phenomenon in team environments.

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*The following letter was written by an athlete, Peter Varellas of the United States, and serves as an excellent introduction and example of cultural leadership at the highest level. Peter lived clearly defined values (and morals), and knew without question that team culture would be defined, for better or worse, by like-minded individuals. The key was to only pursue positive, character-driven actions and thoughts, and to always put the team (and its cultural well-being) first.*

### Inspiration – “Team Expectations”

*by Peter Varellas: Orinda Aquatics, Stanford University (male athlete of the year), US Olympic Team (captain)*

Expectations are a big deal on a team: the expectation to succeed, the expectation to improve, the expectation to learn, grow, have fun, and form friendships. Each individual surely has their own expectations for what they want to get out of their experience with a team. The fallacy however, is that expectations are static. Many do not see that the norms, ambiance, and general sentiment of a team is constantly being reformed and reevaluated; some call it a tradition but tradition carries with it the illusion of permanence. In my opinion it is the function of the coach to monitor and influence the general atmosphere of the team. In many cases, as you know, the coach(es) will extend a great deal of this responsibility to the athletes themselves in the form of captains, leaders, or upperclassmen.

When I joined the team as a sophomore, the leaders of the team were immediately apparent. They set the tone and expectations for the team. **I was fortunate enough to have a high quality group of leaders that, in addition to the coaching staff, taught me not only how to swim fast, but how to be a good person, and in turn how to be an effective leader** as I became an upperclassman. I found that swimmers spend so much time together in the pool that it was quite natural to also spend a great deal of time together away from practice. Many of my friends were in fact swimmers. For me, high school social situations never included drugs or alcohol or any negative behavior. The question is, why?

I feel that my own actions were strongly influenced by that same group of leaders that I spoke of earlier. Whether you realize it or not, a personal choice is no longer merely personal when it affects

the atmosphere of the team. “Peer pressure” may seem old and outdated, but trust me it is still at large. The actions of friends, teammates, and leaders, serve though to create the expectations of what a social situation entails. In a team environment, a norm is developed that can often be directly attributed to the actions of its older members. A team is supposed to be comprised of individuals who are brought together by certain commonalities. Don’t make them negative or destructive. ***Moral of the story: You are constantly reshaping the expectations and general atmosphere of the team. Be sure that you understand how your actions relate to others.***

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## Peer Pressure It should exist!

### The pressure to:

- Act with integrity
- Be respectful
- Look out for others
- Follow all rules
- Be grateful
- Be humble

What is  
Positive Peer  
Pressure?



This can set up as the titanic clash between athlete integrity (hard to pin down) and team need. **Character sets the stage and backdrop for team leadership, respect, and contribution or service.** It helps kids anchor themselves in personal and athletic values, and thus *creates* the culture of the team (Peter Varellas letter). While some may argue that it is not relevant in performance, the opposite is true. **An underlying theme or culture of character *elevates* work ethic, focus, team commitment, etc. The upward pull looks like this:**

- the better the person
- the better the athlete
- the better the teammate
- the better the culture
- the better the swimmer

Character should be at the top of the culture hierarchy as:

- **Character is more important than success.**
- **People are more important than athletes, and,**
- **Life is more important than sports.**

The (ineffective) standard model looks like this:

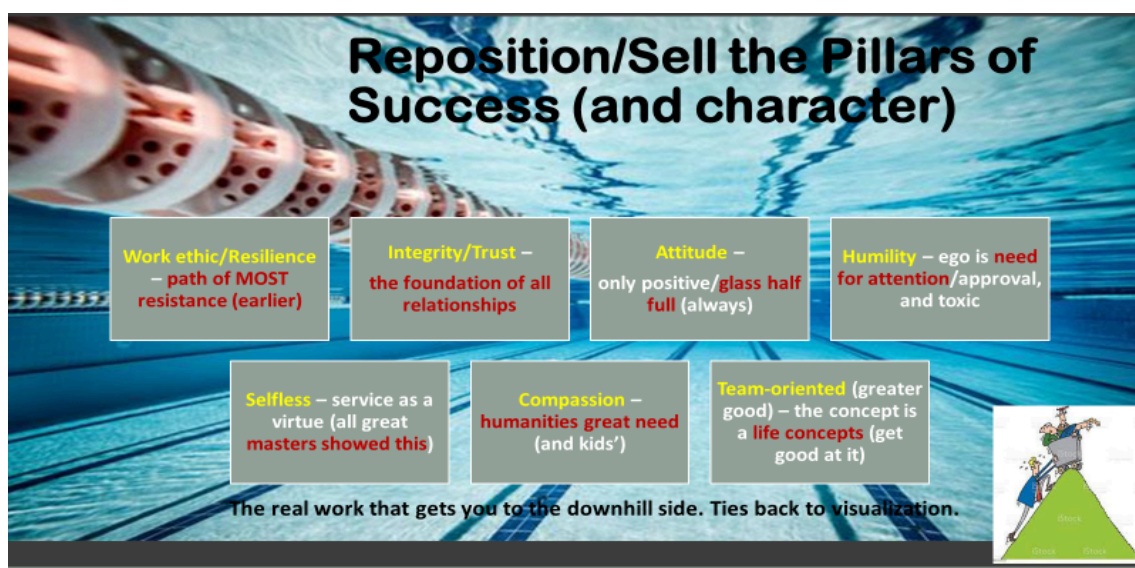
- integrity and sportsmanship are mentioned in Mission Statement
- coaches may talk about it at a higher level
- it is generally absent in the daily process
- kids gravitate to social or athletic flow, or status quo

- coaches (and boards) end up putting out fires of poor behavior, giving up, or looking the other way
- no “lines in the sand” are drawn on discipline
- coaches are complicit (poor role models enabling poor behavior)
- and, the ends justify the means, *IF you are successful (i.e., “the culture is bad, but we win”)*

**“Today’s teenagers are the future leaders in business and politics. People in such positions of authority encounter ethical dilemmas on an even grander scale. It is imperative for teens to learn about ethics and wise decision-making today in order to equip themselves for tomorrow.”**

*Life in perspective - Contra Costa Times*

Coaches have to understand and accept that core virtues can transform a program and that all subcultures can come out of these. The following could be considered the building blocks of a character culture. Therefore, focus should look to the following cultural anchors. You can compartmentalize each of these and evaluate and assess for your team or group. The key is to “repackage” and sell the sports and life benefits of each. See each below with a repackaging note.



- work ethic/resilience - **sell the virtue of work**, as the pathway to success (path of MOST resistance)
- integrity/trust - sell this as black and white, i.e., **NEVER lie or cheat**
- attitude\* (below)
- humility - show that **ego is really insecurity looking for attention**
- selflessness - teach **service as the greatest human gift**
- **compassion - man’s greatest need**
- team-first mentality - live and **work for the greater good**

\*General attitude becomes the lifeline to culture and can lead in either direction of positive/optimistic and negative/pessimistic. There should be continued dialogue and a concerted

effort to eliminate complaining and negativity, for they have no place in a productive, if not inspirational, workplace or program.

**“A complaining tongue reveals an ungrateful heart.” William Arthur Ward**



Yes, it is far easier to teach a drill or run a threshold set than to teach humility and convince young adults that work ethic should be *embraced*. Considerations and practices for developing a character culture at the age-group and senior levels are:

#### **Age-Group Development:**

- **promote larger concept of “future leader”**
- make very clear the character and behavioral expectations of the team
- avoiding teen traps and pitfalls (discuss young character challenges - attitude, bullying, language, alcohol, etc.)
- make clear that to be on the team, you **MUST** be a good teammate (“helper”), be positive, and be a “good kid”
- sell and emphasize – character, national pursuit, university swimmer/leader, etc.
- weekly meetings – articles, letters, discussion, quotes on workouts
- give peer leadership jobs, assign mentors (senior leaders)
- give examples like Peter’s letter, of inspiration, leadership, challenging the social status quo (in middle school)
- coach vigilance (watching in all areas) - language, attitude, behavior, etc.
- move up criteria – maturity, effort, humility, and help
- recognize service and leadership

#### **Senior Character Development (“the road less traveled”):**

- ask them to objectively view the teen landscape from a behavioral, integrity, and general happiness perspective. Does it work?
- **emphasize integrity as the most important virtue in life and for the team**
- sell/demand – “servant/leader”, role model as their role and responsibility
- hold weekly or regular meetings – with articles, letters, discussion of value-driven vs. social-driven
- have serious discussion about hard teen issues

- give examples of inspiration, leadership, challenging the teen social status quo
- coach vigilance (watching in all areas)
- move up criteria based on maturity and team commitment
- recognize character at the team's awards ceremony
- assign "buddy" and mentor relationships with younger/newer members and veteran athletes
- develop communication lines with athletes
- move quickly when issues arise

**The bottom line to building a character culture is**  
**implicit trust...**



**in workout, in the locker room, on a trip, in the relationship**



## Character Checklist

The following can be used for young athletes to get them thinking about character as it relates to the team and personal growth. They should ask the coach, parent, sibling, friend for *HONEST* feedback.

	Area	Rate 1-10	Note	Do ASAP
1	Generally (very) positive			
2	ALWAYS humble – no ego/(selfless)			
3	NO complaining (EVER)			
4	NEVER lie OR use bad language			
5	Good teammate (helps...a lot)			
6	Good family teammate (helps... a lot – and then some more)			
7	Good sibling			
8	Good values			
9	Live values			
10	Reach out to new swimmers (AND kids at school)			
*	Bonus – no or limited/healthy social media or “screen time”			

**Total Score:** (Goal is 100!)

## Building a Leadership Culture (out of character)



This becomes a natural progression from a character-driven environment and ties back the “Connection/Rapport” section in Chapter 2. With regard to leadership, it is easy to assign responsibilities, and certainly athletes would love to be recognized as a “leader”, but are they? in the right way? **True leadership at the athlete level should exist with *implicit trust* and with individuals who are in lockstep with the team and its mission.**

The cultural aspect of leadership, as opposed to simply selecting team captains, is that **there is a teamwide pull to lead, to help, to serve, and to make a difference, at ALL ages and all levels.** And back to the rapport model, this is built with constant dialogue and investment in the athletes both individually and collectively. **It is important that you see character become cultural**, or at least see a critical mass of the team that “buys in”. You can then leverage that to implement a leadership model. You will see that athletes will aspire to move in this direction.

Three phases might look like:

- **Educating**
  - constant dialogue about the power and impact of leadership
  - examples of irrefutable leadership
  - tying leadership to one of life's most valuable skills and pursuits
- **Empowering**
  - ask for assistance in nearly every aspect of your program (“can you help me with...?”)
  - watch the response and the action by the athlete and the group
    - Do they want to help without recognition (ideal)?
    - Do they begin to help without being asked?
- **Delegating (entrusting)** - where the real power of leadership is felt
  - start with lane leaders: send-offs, helping the lane, putting equipment away, etc.
  - set up mentors to support new or younger swimmers
  - create (and possibly rotate) dry land leaders, locker room leaders, etc.
  - leaders for competition warm-up, team cheer, meetings, coach support, team area set-up

**Leadership will become the greatest aspect of team culture as it will accelerate every aspect of your program.** And not only will it mitigate, if not eliminate, issues within the program, it will support the staff, as many areas and responsibilities can be delegated to create layers of management within the team.

## Building a Success Culture (out of character)



**Yes, success is cultural.** Teams that rely on talent only will ebb and flow with regard to team success. Those that have a success vision and process, and are driven to perform at a high level will show continued achievement. **The greatest success formula is the merger of talent, methodology, AND culture.**

We see in many teams almost a resignation of success into a program that simply exists as an activity, and caters to the casual participant. This does a gross disservice to all members, and especially to those who have the ability or desire to reach high levels of performance. And there can be conflicting views within a program on whether or not the team's vision, mission, or identity is driven toward success or mediocrity. While programs end up in a tug-of-war when weighing competitive vs. casual, **the reality is you can have both and it is incumbent upon an adept coach to offer a pathway to the highest level of performance AND a pathway for the casual participant, with the ultimate objective of moving the “casual” athlete to being highly competitive.**

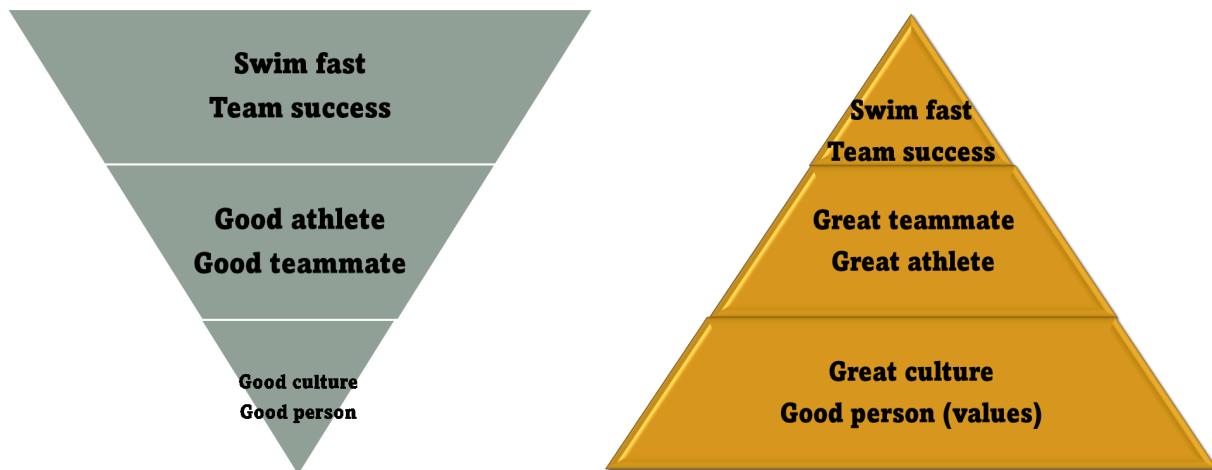
Whether a program in entirety, or at its elite level, pursues high-level success, a culture that is overtly focused on success will gravitate to the areas critical for that success, some of which are:

- coach/team vision to be successful both collectively and individually
- organizational support of achievement at the highest level (travel, equipment, technology, etc.)
- embraced effort that will lead to the support of aggressive training and development
- elevated standards in all areas
- mutual support from athletes for athletes

All great organizations (sports, business, etc.) have very strong foundations of core values and have a success vision. A simple outline to success is:

1. **have a vision to be successful, as a team and with individual athletes (remember the theme quote)**
2. get buy-in on that vision from parents, staff, AND athletes
3. seek mentors who have achieved lasting success WITH a positive team culture
4. build a business model that supports it
5. build a training/teaching program/methodology that will create it
6. talk to athletes incessantly about their potential and the pathway to get there
7. **constantly monitor and evaluate training and performance against relevant benchmarks both regionally and nationally**
8. as mentioned earlier, care about each athlete/person AND what is possible for them. Note: at the highest level of coach-athlete relationships is a deep desire by the athlete to perform at their best *for the team, and yes, the coach.*

When looking at the **character component**, or influence on success, it **is too often ignored**. At the extreme, too many programs focus on performance only and neglect the underlying foundation that performance **should** grow out of. In the (time allocation) model below/left, the vast majority of time and effort is spent on swimming fast, intuitive we know, yet it leads to an unstable model, open to cultural or character breakdown. We see this in egos, infighting, favoritism, parent issues, and many that feel unhappy or unrecognized outside of the elite group, while the model to the right focuses on cultural foundation and thus creates better teammates and athletes *and even higher levels of performance*, for all. Thus, **we advocate for building a character/cultural model and then aggressively pursuing career potential and success at the individual and team levels.**



In sum, cultural pursuit is complicated and can be challenging, but it becomes the very core of all things athletic and personal in terms of growth and development. The professional coach should objectively understand the team's culture (strengths and weaknesses), create a vision for the direction of the program, get buy-in from constituents, sell it, and develop a strategic plan of implementation, management, and accountability. **We, as coaches, have an obligation to our organization and each member to provide the greatest environment possible, and culture IS your environment.**



**Make sure the cultural roots of your program are strong!**

## A Gaming Analogy (“more analogies”?) – to Culture Creation and Athlete Development

*Are you playing checkers or three-dimensional chess?*



To conclude this chapter, and illustrate, yes, with more analogies and requisite clip art, the complexities of managing the parallel and interconnected paths of training and culture building, we can consider a gaming analogy. In board games, at the most basic level, is checkers. It is simple in nature with a fundamental objective. Most anyone can play. Move the pieces. Try to win the game. The comparable example in coaching would be the sole pursuit of time improvement. Not much thought, planning, or methodology involved. We see this primarily in summer-league swimming, and in some club teams – improve and/or win, with very little depth of process.



To develop athletes to train (to race) at a higher level, with the pursuit of detailed efficiency or technical work, video analysis, etc, and a well-thought daily and seasonal training plan, is much more complex, and more akin to a game of chess. The strategy of each piece might equate to decisions on volumes, intensity, duration, as well as using stroke tempos, stroke counts, pace strategies, underwater focus, and on and on. This goes far beyond just “getting faster”, or simply trying to win a heat or event, or make a time standard. As will be discussed in the coming chapters, this should be the process and pursuit of mature, seasoned, and dedicated coaches, attempting to develop their athletes to the highest level.

But employing a training plan, and focusing on technical development for each athlete, doesn’t ensure in any way, a strong, positive, or productive culture. While athletes and teams may perform at a high level, there can be vulnerabilities or even breakdowns in key cultural areas, as we have discussed. Therefore, the overlay of a planned and deliberate team culture that blankets the program in areas of attendance, effort, social connection, etc., becomes much more complex, and it is the coach who ultimately bears this responsibility. Thus, the comparison to two-dimensional chess; a

deliberate culture overlayed on to a detailed training plan, running concurrently, with the coach as the director of both. As described earlier in the chapter, both the training application, and the culture, must be monitored daily, person by person, lap by lap. Remember the stitch analogy.



To add another layer, the third dimension would be the attempt and commitment to develop and implement character mandates into your culture, *and into your training regimen*. This is next level, for next level. So to truly maximize your program, and your athletes potential, you are looking at a detailed and thorough training process, a strong and well-defined culture, *and* iron-clad values that anchor the program.

So what might this look like? You, as the coach, present a very detailed workout session, with separate training groups, and customization for each athlete. Level one. They do a great job in terms of effort, focus, and team support. Second dimension, check. Now, you leave the deck to go into a meeting (I know, not Safe Sport compliant, but this is just a hypothetical), and they execute every detail with precision, maximum effort, and a positive, if not inspiring attitude. Third dimension (character) locked in.

But the character overlay goes far beyond one example and extends, as suggested, to team travel, implicit trust, and ultimately to making prudent social decisions outside of the team. There are no behavior issues, and you see the character component anchor the team culture, and the team culture accelerates performance (and your training and technique plans). *This* is becoming a three-dimensional chess master!

## Character Camp 2012

**"Prepare the child for the path, not the path for the child."**

This camp is run by Ron and Don Heidary, Co-Head Coaches and Co-Founders of Orinda Aquatics and Head Coaches of Campolindo and Miramonte High School. Ron and Don have spoken at the American Swim Coaches Association World Clinic on Life Skills and "Putting Character First" and have written on this topic for the ASCA newsletter. The camp emphasis will be on leadership, making a difference in sports and life, and on becoming a high-character athlete. The camp will cover two tracts, one "wet" and one "dry," four sessions each. There will be an optional orientation for parents prior to Monday's session.

**The dry or personal side will cover non-swimming areas critical to swimming, athletics, and personal growth:**

- Putting character first in swimming and in life
- Real leadership and making a difference (role models vs. social models)
- Goal setting and the big picture – what really matters
- Support networks and appreciation – relationships with parents, coaches, and teammates

**The wet or aquatic track first will cover areas critical to swimming development:**

- High-character training that inspires others – understanding and discipline of positive workout habits
- Technical fundamentals – short axis and long axis balance and progressions
- Training/racing around the walls – starts, turns, finishes, streamlines
- Race strategy – pace, breathing, and finishing strong

**The following quotes and articles are outstanding at selling and inspiring the virtues mentioned above. Use them as themes to daily training, and living.**

“When he took the time to help the man up the mountain, lo, he scaled it himself.” Tibetan Proverb

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Margaret Meade

“Thoughts lead on to purposes; purposes go forth in action; actions form habits; habits decide character; and character fixes our destiny.” unknown

“Better keep yourself clean and bright; you are the window through which you see the world.” George Bernard Shaw

“Adversity introduces a man to himself.” unknown

“You will never be the person you can be if pressure, tension, and discipline are taken out of your life.” James Bilkey

“Life affords no higher pleasure than that of surmounting difficulties, passing from one step of success to another.” S. Johnson

“Followers see the hard work in climbing the mountain of success, while leaders see the success in climbing the mountain of hard work.” unknown

“There is more hunger for love and appreciation in this world than for bread.” Mother Teresa

“To be trusted is a greater compliment than being loved.” George McDonald

“Wise men, though all the laws were abolished, would live the same lives.” Aristophanes

“Humility finds those who credit themselves, and credit finds those who humble themselves.” unknown

“Another shortcoming of desire is that it leads to so much that is undesirable.” Lama Rinpoche, The Door to Satisfaction

“It was never what I wanted to buy that held my heart’s hope. It was what I wanted to be.” Lois McMaster

“Respect yourself enough to walk away from anything that no longer serves you, grows you, or makes you happy.” Robert Tew

“It's not hard to make decisions when you know what your values are.” unknown

“I've learned that everyone wants to live on top of the mountain, but all the happiness and growth occurs while you're climbing it.” unknown



## The Butterfly (*a lesson in resilience*) – author unknown



A man found a cocoon of a butterfly

One day a small opening appeared

He watched the butterfly for several hours as it struggled to squeeze its body through the tiny hole

Then it stopped as if it could go no further

So the man decided to help the butterfly

He took a pair of scissors and snipped the remaining bits of cocoon

The butterfly emerged easily but it had a swollen body and shriveled wings

The man continued to watch it expecting that at any minute the wings would enlarge and expand enough to support the body. Neither happened.

In fact, the butterfly spent the rest of its life crawling around.

It was never able to fly.

**What the man in his kindness and haste did not understand was that the restricting cocoon and the struggle required the butterfly to get through the opening was a way of forcing fluid from the body into the wings so that it would be ready for flight once that was achieved. *Sometimes, struggles are exactly what we need in our lives.* Going through life without obstacles would cripple us. We will not be as strong as we could have been and we would never learn to fly.**

## More Than I Bargained For (a lesson in compassion)

### *What Stella offered went beyond fair trade-*

By Jean Bell Mosley, Cape Girardeau, Missouri

It was an ordinary school day, I was in the fifth grade. Children like me who didn't live close enough to go home for lunch brought their paper-wrapped meals and gathered under the shade of a tree.

Such lunches usually consisted of a sandwich, hard-boiled egg, cookie and a piece of fruit. Bartering prevailed. If a schoolmate's sandwich or cookie appeared to be more appetizing than your own, you tried to negotiate a trade. I always tried to trade something I didn't want anyway – a mashed-bean sandwich or an overripe banana. It never occurred to me to trade a slice of Mama's Old Kentucky walnut cake for my schoolmate's offering of a boring-looking molasses cookie, even though I could see longing in the barterer's eyes.

Sometimes Mama put two pieces of fruit in my lunch package, one to be eaten at morning recess if I was hungry. Quite often, though, I saved that piece of fruit as my bargaining chip to trade for a sugary doughnut or apple pie. Unabashedly, I always examined the looks and quality of my fruit to see which piece was the best and then offered my classmate the poorer, less-attractive piece. I felt no pangs of selfishness. It was just good trading sense.

That autumn day after the lunch-bringers had eaten their food, disposed of the wrappings and dispersed to various parts of the playground, I lingered under the shade of a maple tree, watching monarch butterflies drifting lazily southward. I was still hungry and Mama had put no fruit in my lunch that day. I saw my classmate Stella Downing coming up a path. She was returning from her home, one of the lucky ones who lived near the school. The sunshine glistened on Stella's black curly hair

Her blue dress matched the color of her eyes. She had something in each hand. When she drew closer I saw she was holding two apples. Stella noticed my interest and asked, "Want one?" "Yes," I replied, simply and truly. "But I've already eaten," I added, to indicate I had nothing to trade. Stella held up the two apples, much as I would have done to appraise my trading fruit. One was perfectly shaped, red and shiny, stem intact. No flaws. The other one was smaller, slightly shriveled and dented on one side.

Without hesitation, Stella handed *me* the perfect apple. I held it for a minute, waiting for her to realize her mistake. But when she started to eat the flawed one, I began to eat mine, casting puzzled but appreciative glances in her direction. Stella had no closer bond with me than any of our other schoolmates. But it had taken her no time at all to decide which apple she would give to me. I realized she would have made the generous gesture with others as well. Evidently, it was her nature to give away the best.

Sitting there eating our apples, we laughed as a softball from a nearby game rolled between us. To me, at that moment, it seemed the moving ball was marking a dividing line between Stella and me. I was the shriveled one, she, the perfect. When I finished the apple, overcome with admiration for Stella and shame at my own bargaining practices, I could barely stammer a thank-you. But the thanks I give today is for that defining moment when I began to refine my bargaining powers. **Now I attempt to cross over that imaginary line in the grass to join with the Stellas of this world who always give their best – and in doing so conduct their lives in a way that makes others wish to do better with their own.**

## Quiz

1. As long as kids swim fast fast, the team culture is irrelevant (T/F)?
2. It takes too much time to manage the social dynamics on a team (trick question) (T/F)?
3. The “good kids” will be able to control the team culture (T/F)?
4. A positive team culture will yield better performance (T/F)?
5. One “bad” teammate couldn't possibly affect an entire program (T/F)?
6. Things like academic focus and technique have nothing to do with team culture (T/F)?
7. As long as “sportsmanship” is mentioned in the Mission Statement, you're good to go (T/F)?
8. Coaches are always in control (T/F)?
9. Team culture has no effect on athlete personal happiness and well-being (T/F)?
10. A strong board of directors can override a bad culture (T/F)?
11. Stella offered the better apple because she had a bag of shiny apples in her desk (T/F)?
12. The “butterfly” never learned to fly because it did not take flying lessons (T/F)?
13. Culture will do more for fast swimming than supplements (T/F)?
14. Implicit trust only comes from a bank (T/F)?
15. Social media offers more insight than the Dalai Lama (T/F)?



Quiz answers: 1-F, 2-F, 3-F, 4-F, 5-F, 6-F, 7-F, 8-F, 9-F, 10-F, 11-F, 12-F, 13-F, 14-F, 15-F

## Real Life Situation

James runs a highly competitive program that consistently places among the top teams at Nationals. Everyone likes and respects him as a coach. James has a clear position on coaching with boundaries at the pool, i.e., workout and competition or performance. James does not have the time or interest to deal with personality conflicts, locker room issues, and team “culture”. As such, the team chemistry has become toxic with infighting, bullying, negativity, and dysfunction. James remains solely focused on his athletes, as athletes only, and on how they perform.

**Worth contemplating:**

- *Is James a professional coach?*
- *Is James right to say he is paid to coach and that is what he does at a high level?*
- *Does James bear any responsibility for what happens in the locker room and within the social dynamics of the team?*
- *What would you do differently?*



## Chapter Summary/Take-a-Ways/Tasks

- Understand your team culture
- Recognize and understand the subcultures
- Develop a strategic plan to control and direct the team culture(s)
- Cultivate a character-driven/leadership-oriented culture
- Leverage culture for elevated performance
- Prioritize culture as the most important aspect of your program



# The Professional Swim Coach



- ☐ cares deeply about team culture and knows it is the foundation to every aspect of your program, including success

*Do you?*