Level 3 Assignment – Daniel Brown

Understanding the impact culture on can have on a rugby program

In this century, no NFL franchise has spent more time on the concept of culture than the New England Patriots. With three Super Bowl championships, they have become a model for changing the culture of a franchise. Head coach Bill Belichick has educated all who work for him to cultivate a team that believes in one common goal -- winning.

**NRL grand final 2016: How Craig Bellamy creates a Storm culture**

“Cameron and Cooper read the game as well as any coach. Craig embraced that and made sure the rest of the team is ready to play off the back of that. That’s how a team culture is created.”

“We certainly have a culture within the group that we try and impart on everyone who comes in and really ensure that they know everyone has a part to play in this team. Whether it’s your first Test or your 87th, you’ve got to have a big part to play in the legacy that you can leave when you take the jersey off and that’s all we try and do.”

*Kieran Read - All Black Captain*
The term ‘culture’ has been appropriated by sport, in particular rugby - where it is used in rugby programs and environments and where it is accepted that a strong and positive team culture is necessary for long term success. This ambiguous word is often used to describe a wide variety of issues that can envelop a sporting or rugby club, but when asked to identify or define what it means or if a coach can change culture it then become more difficult to define.

The question to ask is: “If coaches believe that a strong and positive culture is a critical element of long term success, how much time to do we allocate to identifying, improving, influencing or maintaining this culture and more importantly how do we do this?”

Culture can be defined as follows: “Culture is what is created from the messages that are received about how people are expected to behave. Cultures develop in any community of people who spend time together and who are bound together through shared goals, beliefs, routines, needs or values” (walking the talk - Carolyn Taylor 2005).

When defining or identifying culture in a rugby sense it can be best explained as the “way we do things around here” or the “way we behave around here.” In a sporting or rugby sense culture is more about what we actually do, not what we want to do.

Identifying the culture that exists in a rugby program is the first critical step in understanding the impact culture can have on your results and program. A culture is the expression of a team’s attitudes, beliefs and values around their team, players and the competition. By firstly identifying the existing culture this will allow the coach to either maintain and influence a positive culture or change and improve a toxic unsuccessful culture.

Culture models the levels of acceptable behaviour on a team by implying what is allowed or not allowed by team members. This allows team members to understand how to behave, how to communicate, how to work together and how to deal with conflict. If negative behaviour is accepted or modelled by senior members at training or during games then new members to the group and junior members will follow by understanding this to be the acceptable norm of the culture existing within the team. If the culture within your team or club is not acceptable then the next step for coaches is how do go about improving the culture or influencing the culture to change into a positive aspect of the program.

The culture within a playing group is likely to develop in two ways. Firstly, it will emerge from within the players naturally. Although there is a benefit to this as the players feel they are in charge of the culture, the danger is that it would be controlled by the most dominant members of the playing group.
and not necessarily the best option as it can leave the younger, less experienced and quieter players feeling no ownership or input into the culture.

As a coach the more desirable approach to improving or influencing the culture of the playing group is to take an active role in the creation of the culture. It will develop through your leadership and by allowing all members to have an input and discussion in identifying the key values, attitudes and beliefs that will set the foundation of the team culture. During this process, it is critical that all members of the group have input, as it is through a collaborative approach that all group members will feel a sense of ownership for the culture and therefore be more likely to abide by the expectations set by the culture. It is also important for the coach not to dominate the discussion around culture but to steer it in the direction they might like. This is done by asking the right questions to the playing group. An example of the type of questions can be:

- What values do we want to act as the foundation for our team culture?
- What attitudes and beliefs about your rugby, competition and team do you want to hold?
- What are the goals that the team wants to pursue?
- How do the athletes and coaches want to treat each other?
- What kind of atmosphere do we want on your team?

The most common mistake we make as coaches are that we believe that the culture will take care of itself and will continue through the season without any assistance. This is a fundamental and critical error. We believe by having a team meeting where we discuss culture and expectations that the job is complete. For good and successful culture to be maintained and to progress, the culture needs to be living in actions and not just in words. There needs to be consequences, accountability, praise, motivation and continual reminders in order to be successful in maintaining and progressing culture.

This can be done through simple praise of players who exemplify the culture during training, reminders in the training ground gym of key phrases and words, and modelling the culture through our own actions and words. It is also important to give the team members opportunities to show the culture in action. This can be done in team bonding and activities, training, games, after match, etc.
In order for the culture to be maintained and constantly improved, it is also critical for other members of the playing group to continue to lead and influence the culture. Senior players will naturally lead the culture but they must seek opportunities for the junior members of the squad to lead culture so that the culture continues to grow and have new input from different perspectives.

It seems that the role of culture can be a time-consuming aspect of coaching and with so many demands on our time in all aspects of the role what is the importance of culture in a program. It is known through research that for our players to improve performance they need to feel connected to the team and when they do they are more likely to give greater effort and will work as a unit more effectively. It has also been shown that a positive and strong culture helps overcome conflicts that will arise in all sporting teams (selections) and allows all members to maintain a sense of respect. Strong and active culture decreases the risk of undesired values developing, and is generally believed to heighten a member’s sense of belonging, commitment, effort, and enjoyment.

Finally, culture is a critical factor in the success of a rugby program, as it is in a successful business, Corporation or organisation. Although some will find success in the short term with a toxic environment, the majority of long term successful sporting programs will have a strong culture. Rugby programs that possess this cultural alignment have greater success, less turnover of players and staff, greater levels of player engagement, less conflict and higher levels of self-motivated rugby players.