



The Key to Building a Successful Youth Organization – A Foundation of Values: By Shannon Shy, AYF National Membership Director

You hear the mantra “It’s for the kids” a lot in youth organization circles. I know it’s big here at AYF/AYC. Recently, a community leader looking over the fence at AYF from another football organization asked me, “What does that mean – ‘for the kids’”? He continued: “What do you do, for example, if you catch a coach of a championship team cheating using an ineligible player? Do you hurt the rest of the players by taking away their championship? They had nothing to do with the dishonesty.” That question, and my answer to that question, which was received favorably by the community leader, prompted me to write this article for *The Huddle*. (My answer is provided at the end of this article.)

I spend a great deal of time throughout the year communicating with folks around this awesome country (and in other countries) about developing successful youth football and cheer organizations capable of sustainment. The key to success is actually fairly simple – begin by building a values-based foundation and stay focused on those values. Staying focused on the values that caused you to create the organization will ensure that all of your decisions are made in the best interest of the kids. And to be candid, if you’re here for any other reason, AYF/AYC is not the place for you.

Building and sustaining a values-based organization is not difficult. Here is how you do it:

1. Identify your organization’s values. Before you write your by-laws, before you buy equipment, before you lock on fields, before you publicize your registration, **BEFORE YOU TAKE ANOTHER STEP**. . . ., sit down with your fellow ‘founders’ and discuss the reasons why you want to create a youth football and cheer organization. Identify what is important to you. Discuss the **VALUES** that will drive your organization. What is your objective? Are you trying to provide a vehicle for children to learn the importance of education, good character, responsibility, accountability, honesty, education, community service (“Giving Back”), teamwork, the fundamentals of football and cheer, how to deal with adversity, how to turn failure into success, . . .? Are you trying to develop positive, trained, effective mentors (i.e., coaches and other volunteers) that **WILL** have positive influences on the lives of our children? **OR ARE YOU DOING THIS SIMPLY TO WIN?** Hint – If you only want to win, then you are doomed for failure. You may win a national championship, but your organizational existence will be fleeting and odds are that issues of bad character and dishonesty will haunt you and taint your success. Worse, you will

have metaphorically crippled the kids you're pretending to serve – for life. THE KEY IS TO BE HONEST ABOUT YOUR MOTIVATION.

2. Write down the values you have identified and create a mission statement. This mission statement will be the foundation of your organization and should be the first thing your volunteers and parents read when they pick up the organization's by-laws.
3. Refer back to the mission statement as you execute your program and make decisions in executing your program. Every decision your board makes and every decision your coaches and other volunteers make MUST reflect the values pronounced and professed in your mission statement. Dealing with crises, in particular, is made much easier if you can wrap your decision around your values-based mission statement.
4. Ensure you fill your volunteer positions with persons of good character. *Character matters. It really, really matters.* Background checks and in-person interviews for board members, coaches, and other key volunteers are essential tools in weeding out persons of less- than- good character. You will be surprised to find out what you didn't know about some persons wanting to help run the youth organization you're building and, more importantly, wanting to interact with the children of your community.
5. Hold your board members, coaches, other volunteers, parents, and kids accountable when they take actions counter to the mission statement. Ensure you know the rules and by-laws and implement them fairly and judiciously. That is, don't be arbitrary and capricious. But it is ESSENTIAL that you hold people accountable, for their actions, inactions, and words in accordance with the values stated in your mission statement. It is amazing to see how the thought of knowing that one will be held accountable for his or her actions influences his or her behavior.

If you do the five steps above, I promise you that your organization will be a success; one that sustains itself through good times and difficult times. So what was my answer to the gentleman's question about the meaning of "For the kids"? I told him that if you have a values-based foundation to your organization, your values will prompt you to hold the coach accountable for his decision. Accountability in this situation means the team will have to forfeit the championship. The players and the coach must know that actions have consequences and cheaters never prosper. While this may be very painful to the rest of the children on the team and may even seem unfair to them because they had no knowledge, your values-based decision will have a positive influence on them for the rest of their life. This lesson will stay with them and be passed on to all whom they influence when they are old enough to Give Back. After all, character matters. It really, really matters.

Have a great season everyone!

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