

Creating a Winning Club Culture – Excellence, Environment, Everything, Everyday, Everybody.

By Wayne Goldsmith

Every swimming team has a unique culture.

Some teams have a culture of fun, enjoyment, family and friends.

Some teams have a culture of hard work, discipline, dedication and training.

Some teams are based at schools, colleges and Universities and their culture is a reflection of the culture of the institution.

The culture of some teams comes from their location, the ethnic background of the people in the team, the climate or the city they live and train in.

Every team is unique and every culture is special.

But for many teams, there comes a time when the coaches, swimmers, families and supporters decide they want to become a **winning** team. They decide to set some serious competitive goals and work together as a team to achieve them.

And to become a winning team requires the development of a **winning culture**.

What is a winning culture? It's about **environment** and **opportunity**.

A winning culture is one where everyone in the team – coaches, swimmers, families, staff – everyone - is committed to creating a performance focused **environment**. A performance focused environment provides the **opportunity** for the team and every individual on the team – to win.

Developing a winning culture doesn't mean you stop having fun. It doesn't mean that swimming isn't enjoyable. It doesn't mean that people can't hang out and be friends.

It means that the primary goal of the team and everyone associated with it is the development of an **environment of excellence for everyone**.

How do you develop a winning culture?

EMPOWERMENT and OWNERSHIP: CULTURE COMES FROM WITHIN

A winning culture GROWS from within. It cannot be IMPOSED from the outside. The culture of the team is something which comes from the team members: you own it: it is part of you.

With many clubs, particularly those older established clubs with long traditions, there can be an attitude of “this is the way we do it here” or “that new idea will not work here because we’re different”.

In developing a WINNING club culture these barriers to success must be broken down. The swimmers, coaches, officials and families need to embrace change and to seek to be the best of the best in all aspects of swimming. Everyone needs to be committed to improving and accelerating team progress – at the same rate and in the same direction.

Respect the history and tradition of the club. Respect and remember the great performances of the teams and swimmers of the past. But also strive to progress and improve on them. The greatest honor you can do for any club is to make it successful.

PRACTICAL TIP ONE: Before the beginning of the season, bring everyone in the team together for a day of sharing ideas and opinions. Give everyone a chance to speak and share their views. Provide the opportunity for everyone to be heard with respect and dignity. Allow the current team members to feel their views matter and the club is theirs – they are the current custodians of the club – and they are the people who will lead the club into a successful future.

WINNING VISION – A STATEMENT OF SUCCESS

If you don’t stand for something – you will fall for anything.

A Team Vision is a statement which represents the views and opinions of the team which clearly states “THIS IS WHO WE ARE, WHAT WE WANT TO DO, WHERE WE ARE GOING AND WHAT WE WANT TO ACHIEVE AS A TEAM”. It is your team’s TRADEMARK!

For example:

Our vision is to work hard together and to strive to provide every swimmer the best possible opportunity to achieve their best.

Or

Our vision is to be the leading swim team in the State by consistently working hard, encouraging and supporting each other and doing everything possible to ensure all swimmers in the team have the opportunity to achieve success.

PRACTICAL TIP TWO: Once the team comes up with a team Vision, write it up on the team room wall. Have every swimmer write it down in their training diary. Get it printed on t-shirts. The closer you stay in touch with this vision, the more the vision comes to life.

WINNING CULTURE VALUES

Having a great vision is one thing: bringing it to life is another.

Values are a set of words that team members develop to provide a guide on how to act and live and which help you and your team realize your vision.

For example:

Team Vision: Our vision is to work hard together and to strive to provide every swimmer the best possible opportunity to achieve their best.

Values to support the **Team Vision:**

- **HARD WORK** (“work hard” from the Team Vision)
- **PASSION** (“strive” from the Team Vision)
- **TEAM SPIRIT** (“together” from the Team Vision)
- **UNITY** (“every swimmer” from the Team Vision)
- **RESPECT** (“every swimmer” from the Team Vision)
- **EXCELLENCE** (“best possible” and “best” from the Team Vision)

These six words become the themes for the team for the season and the guidelines for everything the team does.

PRACTICAL TIP THREE: Use the Values as “code words” for team practices. For example, when things get tough towards the end of a hard set, team members can use words like “PASSION” and “SPIRIT” to encourage and motivate each other. Living the vision means living the dream.

WINNING CULTURE BEHAVIOURS AND STANDARDS

In a perfect world, everyone would live the team values, everyday. However, just as there are “road regulations” to provide a set of rules for people to drive cars and “laws” to provide a set of rules for how to live as part of society, swim teams need to have a set of team rules to provide a framework for how to act and behave at training, competition and other team activities.

Team rules or behavior standards need to be developed and enforced by the people the rules and standards apply to: **the swimmers.**

Team rules should grow from the team vision and team values and be a practical set of guidelines for how the team will behave in a range of situations and circumstances.

For example:

TEAM VALUE: UNITY

TEAM RULE: All swimmers will have equal opportunity to train and compete.

TEAM VALUE: HARD WORK

TEAM RULE: All swimmers who have committed to swimming at national championships next season must complete a minimum of seven sessions per week.

In addition to team rules, a set of CONSEQUENCES for breaking team rules should be developed by the team. These are a set of clear, fair, just, reasonable and equitable “laws” which the swimmers in the team believe best represent how they want to be judged and punished for breaking team rules.

For example:

TEAM VALUE: RESPECT

TEAM RULE: All swimmers will show respect for each other as people and for each other’s property.

CONSEQUENCE FOR BREAKING TEAM RULE: Team room cleaning duties for two weeks.

PRACTICAL TIP FOUR: Form a LEADERSHIP group from team members which can be elected by team members or selected by a panel of team members and coaches. The LEADERSHIP group should consist of swimmers of varying ages and levels of ability so that the views of everyone are listened to, respected and represented. The LEADERSHIP group needs to be empowered to make decisions, to implement team rules and to administer the consequences of breaches of team standards of behaviours.

From LEADERSHIP comes CULTURE. From CULTURE comes PERFORMANCE.

LIVING EXCELLENCE – “Not every four years.....everyday” (US Olympic training centre motto).

Lots of teams come up with great slogans, team visions and cool team rules. But very, very few teams actually develop winning cultures. Why? Because words which say EXCELLENCE are easy to come up with – what makes the difference is LIVING excellence.

PRACTICAL TIP FIVE: Develop a team war cry or song which is based on the team values and triggers everyone to start thinking and acting like a winning team.

At the start of every training session, someone in the team should lead the team war cry and everyone joins in signaling the start of training and the commitment the team has made to each other and to excellence.

KEEP IT RELEVANT – CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Winning once is tough. But a winning culture means you are working to ensure that winning is sustainable – i.e. the culture that you have created is a positive, winning environment with provides ongoing opportunities for swimmers and coaches to perform at their best season after season after season.....year after year after year.

It is important that the team sits down at the end of every season and reviews how things went and makes a new commitment to improving, changing and progressing.

Why? Because success in swimming is a **MOVING TARGET**. What works this season may not work next season. World records are always getting faster meaning that if you stand still.....you will be left behind.

PRACTICAL TIP SIX: A simple way of reviewing your performance as a team is to brainstorm the season using three questions:

- What are we doing that we should **keep doing**? Or What is working?
- What are we doing that we should **stop doing**? Or What is not working?
- What are we not doing that we could introduce to **improve** our performance? Or What are some new things we can do that will work?

Ask tough questions, get honest answers and you will lay the foundation for a successful future.

Creating a culture of excellence and developing a winning culture does not take a lot more money, facilities, time or resources.

It takes a common desire to work hard and to create an environment where everyone has the optimal opportunity to perform at their best – consistently.

It's not for everyone – but for some, being part of a winning team which has grown from a winning club culture can be the stuff that swimming dreams are made of.

Wayne Goldsmith