

HAZING ARTICLE

Hazing; The Ritual that Undermines Performance

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By Dr. Keith Wilson, psychotherapist and performance consultant in El Paso Texas

The pictures of the hazing disaster last year in suburban Chicago are still etched in my mind. It is hard to believe that girls from the same high school could become so destructive to each other in the name of school ritual.

Sometimes the harmful hazing is caused by a situation that gets out of control and other times it is a planned activity to hurt and humiliate the people who are being initiated. In the case of the Chicago hazing incident, it was planned to be destructive and humiliating since they intentionally chose to do it off school grounds knowing this type of activity would not be tolerated.

Building School Spirit

Building school spirit through rituals is a time-honored tradition at most campuses in the United States. Oftentimes, hazing is defended as a way for people to earn their place in an organization. Somehow, the distorted logic is that the worse the torture a person has gone through, the better leader or participant that he or she will be. The cycle of violence is one of the factors that contributes to hazing getting out of control. If a person has been violated, humiliated or physically hurt in the name of joining an organization, he or she is more likely to escalate the next ritual event to another level of violence and humiliation. The violence cycle creates the belief that the shame the person experienced has to be expelled the next year when he or she moves into the role of perpetrator.

The ideal that determines appropriate ritual activity should come from the goals of the organization. If the goal of the organization is to foster positive relationships and improve team spirit, then rituals need to be developed that will enhance team bonding.

If, on the other hand, the goal of the organization is to spread hate and distrust, then negative rituals (hazing) are what are chosen. It is not uncommon to hear from high school sports teams that use negative hazing and intimidation that younger players are afraid of older established players. These negative feelings will undermine team performance if the younger player ever has to play with the older player on the field.

Creating Fear in Players

This negative fear undermines performance, because the younger player will be more focused on not messing up or getting in trouble with the older player. This fear distracts the younger player from performing at the level he or she is capable of and for which he or she has trained. This is a particular problem in some high school sports where it is likely that freshmen will be participating with seniors on the playing field. If the seniors have created a sense of fear, then they will be disappointed as the freshman tries to play at the level expected in varsity-level sports.

Team Dynamics

Every athlete and coach has probably experienced a team that does not work together. It is obvious when good team bonding doesn't exist. Certain players are left out of the flow of the game. When the ball isn't passed in basketball or a player isn't supported when batting, this type of player behavior will create friction on the team. This friction undermines the performance of the team and will likely cause more friction because of errors that

occur on the field. Bad performance and bad communication will create even more friction on the field and in the locker room. It feeds on itself and continues to worsen.

Competitive sports are difficult enough when a team works well together. There will always be challenges to overcome. When a team is only about individuals or about cliques, then the team will not perform well under pressure on the playing field.

Once the team has been chosen, it is imperative for the leadership of the team to create a positive unit. Whether the team is decided by cuts or coach selections, there is work to be done to help the team get into a positive supportive unit.

Becoming a Team

The beginning of team-gelling can happen in many ways. However, it starts with the understanding that all people on the team are essential to the well-being and high performance of the team. Recognizing that all members of the team may be called upon to perform on the field at a high level, it is imperative that all activity is done to build trust and belief in each participant on the team.

Team-building rituals should be focused on team development and not on individual embarrassment and injury. It is this area that is most likely to be abused or misunderstood. Whether an initiation ritual involves doing silly things like dressing up in weird clothes or singing songs during school assembly, the activity should not be one that creates such anger and humiliation. When this type of initiation is done well, it creates fun and helps all people on the team know that the new player is willing to trust the older ones to do activities which enhance the performance of the team.

Team dinners, fund-raising and field improvement are all activities that help increase team bonding. One of the responsibilities of the coach is to help or teach the older leaders the power of team development and its role in this important part of the team. If senior leadership doesn't understand this role nor is taught skills to help achieve this goal, then it is likely to sink to the type of leadership that relies on humiliation and negative reinforcement. The leadership may have fun dishing out such painful events, but the results for the team will be negative.

Power of Rituals

It is easy to get caught up in the power of hazing because it looks fun to the leaders. However, when you humiliate or hurt a member of your team, he or she will not trust you on the playing field because of the way you treated that team member off the field.

It is an important choice. Train a team for success by building trust and belief or train a team for disaster by focusing on negative humiliation.