

Ready for Anything

Day in and day out, athletic directors have to expect the unexpected. This author turns to six truths to make the process go just a little more smoothly.

By Jay Gardiner

Every morning when we walk into our offices, we never really know what the day will bring. Whether you're a rookie athletic administrator in charge of one small area or a veteran who oversees the entire department, the job entails responding to challenges and solving problems. To be successful, our decisions need to be made quickly and they must be repeatedly on-target throughout the day.

As a young athletic administrator, far too many years ago, I adopted "six keys for success" to guide me through every challenge. I can't recall exactly how I came to find these guidelines, but I know that for two decades they have helped me deal with people and situations in a straightforward and positive manner.

I am certain that my father, Bill Gardiner, who was a college athletic director,

had something to do with pushing these principles towards me. They probably also appealed to me based on my values and personality. But, most importantly, they have stood the test of time through various leadership roles I've held.

Though they may sound like common sense, these six principles have proven to be much more than that. By reviewing them regularly, they have helped me react in a

Author Jay Gardiner, Athletic Director at Oglethorpe University, gathers his thoughts in between meetings.

more consistent way to the situations I've faced. They've helped me keep a proper perspective from which to filter every interaction in the work environment. And they've helped me treat people fairly and equitably by forcing an honest and straightforward approach to dealing with others.

I have had these six keys posted on a wall of every office I have ever sat in. For over 20 years, I have pointed to their words both figuratively and literally, whenever I have had to lead a difficult meeting. My hope is that they will help others in their own interactions.

1. LISTEN GENEROUSLY

JAMES
2:1

I believe that there are truly two sides to almost every problem that crosses my desk.

The word "generous" is used with great intent in this first key. Generosity implies a giving spirit—to listen in an unselfish and totally giving manner ... It entails giving up the right to listen to your inner voice while someone else is speaking.

This means there are two stories I need to hear and understand before making any decision. Most of the bad decisions I have made came from a knee-jerk response to a comment or concern expressed by an individual without having combed through all the facts. If we learn to listen in a generous way, we make better, more thoughtful decisions.

One of my basic beliefs is that, in general, people don't lie intentionally. But people do see facts through a filter that is different from our own. By listening intently and completely, we may discover more about the story than we would have otherwise.

The word "generous" is used with great intent in this first key. Generosity implies a giving spirit. To listen in an unselfish and totally giving manner allows one the chance to really "hear" everything. Generousness also entails giving up the right to listen

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to your inner voice while someone else is speaking and not interrupting the flow of their thoughts.

It is important that we wait patiently before we add our perspective to a situation. I try to use good body language while listening. I sit up, look the other person in the eyes, and work hard to send the message that what they are saying is important to me.

I once supervised a coach who felt that I just didn't understand his point of view on recruiting. We were having very little success in his sport, and I believed this was directly related to his unwillingness to work hard at bringing in quality student-athletes. He was a part-time coach, but our program was really suffering. From his perspective, he felt that I just didn't "get it."

The bigger problem, I finally realized, was that we had never really had any lengthy discussions regarding his side of this issue. I made the time to have a heart-to-heart talk with him, when I could listen generously and understand his individual issues with respect to recruiting. He told me he was struggling with balancing a young family and another job, and that finding time for recruiting was very difficult.

By the end of the discussion, he felt that I really "heard" him, and from there, he was able to recognize where he was falling short. He eventually resigned, but years later he told me that he appreciated the way I listened to his thoughts on the subject.

2. SPEAK STRAIGHT

This is probably the hardest key for me to follow. I never want to hurt someone's feelings, and I tend to look for the good in every situation and in every conversation.

But when supervising coaches and staff, it is important to be clear about your goals and what you are thinking. In fact, by adopting and implementing this principle, I have ended up hurting others far less than I would have by sugarcoating a discussion. In the long run, I think people appreciate knowing exactly where they stand and precisely what your expectations are of them.

Prior to holding a difficult meeting with a staff member, I often point to my posted keys and announce that I owe it to them to "speak straight" on this issue. I begin with a positive comment about the person and then jump right into whatever needs to be addressed. By telling others exactly what you are thinking, you encourage real dialogue and real change.

A tip that my father gave me was to out exactly what I wanted to say before a meeting. If needed, I stop the meeting, turn to the paper and read it aloud. Some would argue that this is bad technique—it is too formal and comes off as fake. But it has worked for me, especially if I haven't done a very good job of articulating my concerns as clearly as I should have up to that point in the meeting.

Speaking straight also relates to setting expectations that are clear and concise. I have always used three points of emphasis at every athletics program I've worked at, and I now mention them in almost every speech I give: to maintain the academic integrity of the university, to provide for a positive student-athlete experience, and to strive for winning championships. My staff actually finds it a bit humorous as they listen to me say these things for maybe the hundredth time. But I learned the hard way how important it is to spell things out repeatedly and make sure I'm understood.

Once, at a previous institution, a lacrosse coach came into my office for his annual evaluation. We talked about these three goals, and I asked him to explain them back to me. He couldn't do it. On most of the goals he was close, but he just didn't grasp what I wanted. I explained that these were important principles for him to understand, and we ended the meeting.

I suppose I wasn't straight enough with him. The next year, his team continued to have academic issues and student-athletes complained about the overall experience of playing for him. He had a winning season, but was let go because he didn't comply with the adoption of our goals.

He then contested his firing and made the statement that I never specifically laid out what I expected from him. He claimed the goals were simply a "vague and wordy" expression. You can bet that I have since always made a point of clearly articulating what I expect of our staff.

Many of us are finding our way through the jungle of increasing parental involvement. I have found that this key of speaking straight is very effective with parents. I make sure not to be insulting, but I force myself to tell our parents exactly what we expect of them.

I set the ground rules for every conversation by telling parents that I will talk with them about anything except playing time and team strategy. I also let them know that our conversation will be confidential, that I hope they would treat it the same way, thus avoiding discussion of internal issues among several parents. Finally, I ask them to be as direct and straight with me as I

ise to be with them. This has proven to be effective in most cases and has helped to prevent issues from becoming crises.

Speaking straight isn't a natural thing for me. It has become a learned behavior that I think I use effectively today. And it has been immensely important in my leadership progress.

3. HONOR OTHERS' COMMITMENTS

Most of us who work in athletics are passionate about what we do. But most of us are also passionate about other things in life. Whether it's a hobby, being the best parent we can be, or involvement in a religious group, personal commitments play a key role in our well-being. When we, as leaders, view our staff members' outside obligations as important, we make a huge statement about their worth.

I encourage those I supervise to leave early for a son's or daughter's ball practice or piano lesson. If someone has a sick relative, I push them out the door to take care of them. Throughout the year, I try to provide relief from the pressures of the day-to-day grind of coaching or administering in any way I can.

By doing so, I have found a much greater willingness for individuals to work towards a common goal and be part of our department's team. Because I honor their commitments, they honor others', and we can better solve problems together.

For example, coaches have a tendency to become a bit selfish when it comes to their squads, and they often schedule practices when it will work best for their team. During the two times of the year when sports seasons overlap, coaches concluding their seasons were using the 4-8 p.m. time slots to practice, while teams that were in the midst of preseason workouts were practicing at 6 a.m. None of our coaches gave much concern to the sports medicine staff members who needed to be present for practice and the treatment of athletes. In our case, both of our athletic trainers have young families, and I could see they were becoming exhausted and discouraged.

By calling this to the attention of our coaches, they were given the opportunity to "honor others' commitments" and arrange a

more suitable practice setup for all involved. In this particular case, compromises were reached and the harmony of our department was restored. The sports medicine

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staff members were able to implement a schedule that allowed them to perform their duties at work while taking care of their responsibilities at home.

We talk a lot about work-life balance at Oglethorpe. By following this principle, we

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are able to accomplish our goals while helping people feel good about their life both at work and at home.

4. BE FOR EACH OTHER

"Being for each other," means that I expect everyone to root on their co-workers to achieve their own defined successes. This requires intentionally expending energy away from one's self and one's team and releasing it to other programs, which creates a true family approach to working together.

We spend a good deal of energy trying to create this family spirit amongst our student-athlete population, as well. Nothing makes me prouder than to look into the stands at a big home game and see staff members and student-athletes cheering on the team.

How do we foster this department-wide spirit? To start, I emphasize the need for our coaches to focus their resource comparisons with other teams in our league instead of worrying about what other teams at our institution have. Each sport is different and it is important that jealousy and discussions

of sport-to-sport equity do not arise.

At a previous institution, we used a guest coach program to foster unity. Every coach was a "guest coach" for another sport for one contest. The coach spoke to his or her guest team the night before and sat with the team through the game. It helped our staff appreciate the difficulties another coach might be experiencing and understand how every team needs support.

We also promote the idea that success achieved by one is success achieved by all. That leads to our coaches genuinely pulling for each other in a very real and positive manner. I think our student-athletes also are proud of the successes of their fellow student-athletes.

It has been a joy to watch how close our staff has become and how supportive our athletes are of each other. Being for each other is a principle that helps foster a feeling of unity and togetherness, which can be carried on after college. For our athletes, understanding how important it is to support one another helps them achieve great success in the business world after their careers in athletics are over.

5. APPLAUD ACHIEVEMENT

In its simplest form, for any organization to sustain long-term success, individuals must excel. It's easy to recognize teams that win championships or student-athletes who record personal bests. But it's just as important to applaud the achievements of those who work behind the scenes to make our programs great.

At our staff meetings we hand out a monthly "Attagir/Attaboy" award. This honor is given to someone who has gone above and beyond the norm in his or her work. The winner is responsible for picking the winner the following month. They prepare a short speech extolling the positive achievements of the recipient and we all provide our pats on the back and fist bumps. The winner gets to park in the spot closest to our facility for that month—a relatively small prize, but one that goes a long way to foster a feeling of caring and achievement.

I have been fortunate to have worked for athletic directors at the NCAA Division I level who made it a point to constantly recognize my personal and professional successes. By doing so, I became a more enthusiastic

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dedicated employee. Nothing pleased me more than others noticing something that I accomplished and letting me know how proud they were of me. I have tried

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to follow my mentors' example with those I supervise. I drop notes throughout the year to let people know that I have noticed. In most cases, these go out to staff members whose contributions may otherwise go unrecognized.

Public recognition of success is also important, and I am blessed to work closely with an exceptional Assistant Athletic Director for Media Relations, who does a superb job of applauding the achievement of all our staff members and student-athletes on a daily basis. From the freshman golfer to the veteran track and field coach, individuals are extremely appreciative when they are recognized. Their desire to continue to achieve increases exponentially with every public recognition they receive.

6. CRITICIZE IN PRIVATE

While you want to applaud achievement as publicly as possible, it is extremely important that any criticism be done in private. Nothing will destroy the positive feelings gained by following these principles than airing one's dirty laundry for all to see.

Here at the NCAA Division III level, we aren't faced with the media attention that I witnessed at Division I, but just as it is important to say, "no comment" to the 11

o'clock news at the big-time level, it is also best not to comment to the history professor working out in your facility who wants to know why you haven't fired a coach on your staff. Making any unprofessional comments destroys trust and creates an "us versus them" mentality among the staff.

In this day and age, we also have to work extra hard to make sure any criticisms by parents are kept private. I have witnessed the demise of teams by a relentless assault on a coach by the athletes' parents. To nip this in the bud, I strongly encourage parents to raise their issues with their child's coach in private. If they talk to me about a coach, I make sure it happens behind closed doors.

Perfection is something we all strive for and never quite achieve. As I write this article, I clearly remember the times when I didn't follow these six keys as closely as I would have liked. The times that I have focused on them, however, I have found remarkable success in guiding events in the direction I intended them to go. Hopefully, I have provided a guideline for others to use in managing the ever-changing and dynamic world of intercollegiate athletics. ■

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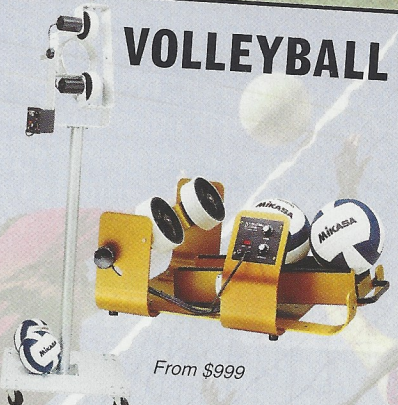
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