

The Secrets of Successful Clubs

You have worked hard to build your club – but what are the three simple secrets to making it even better? Learn the three critical elements that make or break an organization's success on and off the field.

by Ruth Nicholson

The three secrets to a successful club live within the balance and partnership between

- High-quality coaching and coaching support,
- Effective governance and leadership that provides direction and not micro-management of club programs, and
- Efficient operations that make the best use of staff and volunteers to support players and coaches on the field.

The people who serve in these roles make up the Off-Field Team.

Quality Coaching and Coaching Support

It is no secret that without good coaches, players will have a very difficult time developing and improving their skills in the game. The real secret is that there are two key components of the quality of coaching in a club.

Behind the scenes, there is the coaching support system. This is comprised of the club's coaching recruitment and retention system, coaching leadership (often in the person of a technical director or director of coaching), professional development and coaching education opportunities, and administrative support for coaches at both the club and team levels. The club's player development philosophy and training curriculum are also a part of this system.

The coaching skills and knowledge working with players tend to receive more attention and scrutiny. One of the most important criteria a player family uses for selecting a club is the quality of the coach for whom its child will play. Whether volunteers or paid staff, coaches spend a significant amount of time off the field preparing for training sessions and games, as well as their own self-improvement. Much of this effort is invisible to players and their families even though it contributes significantly to the quality of the player experience.

Governance and Leadership

A great many clubs are non-profit organizations lead by boards of directors made up of parent volunteers. This means that the leadership of clubs is made up of people who deeply care for the success of the organization, at least at it relates to the athletic experience of their children. It also provides the challenge for parents to separate their natural advocacy for their children from their legal and fiduciary responsibilities to the organization as officers and leaders of the club.

The most effective organizations have clear roles and areas of responsibility for their board members. This enables board members to focus on organization budgeting and funding, policy development, setting program priorities and direction, and delegating activities and program implementation to others. Clubs may have a mix of professionally paid staff and volunteers (including coaches) to deliver the club's programs, but it is important for board members to resist the temptation to micro-manage club activities. Engaging a broader spectrum of staff and

volunteers not only spreads out the work, it also invites more people to become invested and supportive of the club.

Engaging a broad spectrum of people is also a critical component of attracting club members, engaging sponsors, acquiring grants, and implementing fundraising programs. The leadership of board members is key to making these activities successful. Without adequate funding, the operations of the club are compromised.

The need for this component of good governance and leadership also applies to for-profit clubs, especially those founded by coaches or former players who are experts in the game. There is a tendency to believe that game knowledge trumps the other types of knowledge and expertise needed to run an organization, which can lead to serious organizational problems. It is critical that whoever is leading the governance of the organization – an owner or a board of directors - is always aware of how decisions impact and support players first, while also tending to the realities of budget, staffing, and program delivery.

Operations and Administration

Individuals, sponsors, and grant-making organizations will not give money to clubs who do not have their organizational acts together. Although the day-to-day operations of a club can seem mundane, without player registrations, fee collection, field and facility reservations, registration for leagues and tournaments, and uniform and equipment procurement, no club can field a team in competition.

Club administrative activities should support players and coaches in a way that aligns with and implements the club mission and strategic plan.

The operations and administrative activities of a club are often overlooked because people believe they are too busy to build or maintain efficient business processes. This can be further complicated by

- High turnover and burnout rates in volunteers,
- Concentration of institutional knowledge in only a few people who may leave when their child leaves the club,
- Lack of understanding of the number and complexity of the jobs needed to run a club, and
- An assumption that coaches will pick up the slack even when their skills, knowledge, and interests lie with pushing players on the field, not pushing paper.

Staffing and the development and maintenance of a good volunteer management program is one of the keys to a successful club. Well-designed and implemented volunteer programs can have participation rates of 85-100% and return rates of over 95%.

What about Parents?

The three components of the Off-Field Team are functional elements. Parents may play a role in any of those components as coaches, members of a board of directors, or in administrative support roles at the team or club levels. The success of a club rests with how well the people in these roles – including, but not limited to parents - work together to support players.

Parent education begins with consistently clear expectations and positive modeling in the club culture and collaborative work of the Off-Field Team.

The Alpha Dog Syndrome and Conflict

Each of the elements of the Off-Field Team have specific responsibilities and expertise needed to support players and coaches. Parents also have specific responsibilities and expertise to add to the mix.

- Board members and club owners are accountable for the overall legal and financial management of the organization.
- Coaches are in a position of leadership and power with their teams and within the club. They are the subject matter experts in the game with expertise in how to work with and develop players.
- Operations and administrative staff (including volunteers) manage non-coaching club operations.
- Parents are responsible for their children/players.

When We Play Out of Position, We Trigger Conflict

The competition belongs between players in the game, not within the Off-Field Team between adult egos and power plays. In successful clubs, the members of the Off-Field Team are all respected sports people with different skills, clear roles, and appropriately integrated responsibilities.

Characteristics of Successful Off-Field Teams

The Governance and Operations elements exist to support Coaching, and through the Coaching element, they all support Players. The three parts of the Off-Field Team are equal in importance because they play different roles. They need to be in balance with each other for the club to be successful.

Successful Off-Field Teams:

- Understand their club's mission and player development approach
- Respect the roles of the three (3) components of the Off-Field Team: Coaching, Governance, and Operations
- Understand why rules and processes exist and look for ways to streamline them
- Actively work to communicate and collaborate within the Off-Field Team to support players
- Remind each other that when they get lost in details, politics, or organizational administrivia, that Compass Point North Always Points to Our Players.

Ruth Nicholson is the founder of [GO! On Demand](#), a 24/7 Resource and Training Library offering youth sports organizations proven leadership and administrative tools. One of four national finalists for the 2018 Hudl Innovator of the Year award, Ruth has developed an affordable program of over 30 recorded training webinars and more than 60 resource documents that help youth sports organizations improve operations, better manage staff and

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