



Seven Key Areas of Focus for Volleyball Coaching Success

Introduction

My belief is that all levels of amateur athletics should be more than just a game, they should serve as a means to improving mental and emotional strength, leadership skills, employability skills, and networking opportunities. The majority of athletes at some point began participating for a love of the sport and for fun, so providing them a means of enjoyment must be a program priority. As coaches we get so busy working that we often neglect to adequately think and plan to intentionally make sure that we are creating the best atmosphere to give what we want for the athletes to experience the best opportunity to occur .

Most coaches split our daily practice plans into segments (such warm-ups, individual skills, defensive drills, offensive drills, conditioning) to ensure that we are covering all areas of our sport during practice. I have also defined seven key result areas or roles that I spend time in to guide my work as a head coach. I want to make sure that I am spending time thinking and working in all of the areas that improve our program. This list of seven roles helps me to focus my thinking on doing just that.

They key question to continually ask yourself is:

What am I and our staff doing today to improve each of these areas of our program?

Each of these seven areas will continually evolve as you and your staff continue your professional development and growth.

Seven Key Result Areas

1. **Philosophy and Leadership**—Defining and instilling your program’s ideals, values, and culture every day.
2. **Organization and Management**—maximizing the resources at your disposal.
3. **Individual Participant Development**—Developing your players skills and attitudes within your system.
4. **Team Development**—Develop, implement, and teach systems for team play that fit your players’ strengths and abilities.
5. **Role Definition**—Assign roles that best fit each player within the team system, work to keep them in those roles, and redefine roles as players change or the needs of the team change.
6. **Coaching Staff Development**—Intentional professional development for the entire coaching staff.
7. **Service, Promotion, and Public Relations**—Promoting our program as a whole and the players individually.

My goal every day during our games season is to do something that moves us forward in one of the first five areas. When our games season is over, Area #5 (Role Definition) is not an area for daily consideration, but all other items are on the agenda for each work day. However, with our improvement season (some call it off-season, I like improvement season) skills workouts, we do work to expand the skills and thus the ways that each player will be able to contribute to the team for the next (upcoming) season. In order to stay focused, I keep an outline of this document with specific written tasks and goals in my daily planner.

Area of Focus #1: Philosophy and Leadership

Defining and instilling your program's ideals, values, and culture every day.

My first priority as a head coach is to make sure that I have defined (in writing) a clear direction and philosophy on which to build every aspect of our program. A huge part of my job is to develop it, present it, and embody it so that our assistant coaches, players, managers, and all other stakeholders not only "buy in," but that they believe in it, support it, and feel that it is essential to our success.

There is no doubt that player development (Area #3 in my seven areas of focus) has the biggest impact on winning and losing. My reason for prioritizing having my philosophy entrenched as #1 is that it provides direction for our player development efforts within the scope of our whole program.

I have labeled the structure of our program "The (Insert School Name or Mascot Here) Way." It includes our style of play, the intensity, attitude (both on and off the court behavior) and all other intangibles that we stress. I have found the by using the phrase, "Is that the (name of our school) Way?" when correcting individual or team lapses or poor performance. It focuses more on what is best for the team and what the participants believe in, rather than creating an atmosphere of animosity where a coach is perceived as being against an individual player or group of players. It is not the coach's way that we are working for, it is the way of our program and has been built by the efforts of everyone who has ever been a part of our program.

In order to take that approach, you must clearly define in writing what "The Way" is for your team and then continually lead in that direction. If a coach doesn't have a clearly defined and written vision, it is impossible to achieve the consistency, unity, and intangibles a program needs to succeed from year to year as players, assistant coaches, and administrators change. It has been said, and I believe, that if you don't have your philosophy in writing, then you really don't have a philosophy.

For us, our basic structure is that our program is about toughness, skills and schemes, and our core values. Everything about our program must fit within this structure.

Area of Focus #2: Organization and Management Maximizing the Resources at Your Disposal

Even if your athletic administrator does the purchasing, facility maintenance, and scheduling for your program, most will welcome and encourage input from their coaches.

Taking care of organizational items is not the most exciting part of coaching, however it will definitely have a negative impact on your program if neglected. It is a responsibility that is better handled proactively rather than reactively. Make sure to stay on top of things such as your equipment, uniforms, balls and other such items are properly and ordered in a timely fashion, received, paid for, and stored.

Having a long term plan for the funding of big ticket items may require more planning and possibly even fundraising, so it is important to keep those items on your list and in front of the administration. The only way to do that is to give it some thought and review on a continual basis. Even smaller “extra” items that help make your program special require budgeting

Keep a file of the officials who work your games both at home and on the road. That way you can make recommendations to your Athletic Administrator as far as who to hire at home. You will also be prepared when it comes time to turn in evaluations to your state association.

The more efficiently you can handle these types of items that need to be done, the less they become urgent in your face tasks when you are more focused on coaching your team.

Area of Focus #3: Individual Participant Development

Develop our players skills and attitudes within our system

Most coaches would agree that “The team with the best players usually wins.” Granted, there is a certain amount of talent that is natural. It has been my experience that in most coaching situations, the majority of teams on your schedule over a two to four year period will probably have talent that is similar to yours. Our number one job as coaches is to give them opportunities to learn and grow as people. Our number one job in terms of winning games is to develop our players’ on-court abilities and skills.

In addition to developing volleyball skills that are necessary to thrive in a system and style of play that puts the good of the team ahead of the individual, we can work to improve their athleticism, and to develop their mental capacities to handle the competition and pressures of a season. This must take place both during the season and out of your games season.

Each year, we develop specific and measurable performance goals that the players know for our individual skill and sports performance development drills. These are measurable goals for our drills and use them in and out of season. The five performance levels we have are 1) Sectional Champion 2) Varsity Regular (top 7 players) 3) Varsity 4) JV 5) Freshman.

We use similar quantifiable goals in our running, weight lifting, and agilities that we do in our sports performance and conditioning workouts in the offseason.

We have a specific plan to develop mental toughness in our players that includes defining what it is and what it is not, not allowing anyone in the program to use or accept excuses, not accepting moping, pouting, poor body language, and rehearsing in practice any and all pressure situations we might encounter in a game. That is not to say that we can simulate the pressure of a game in practice, but I feel that if we have rehearsed it in practice, it gives the player confidence that they have a plan of attack for the games.

Area of Focus #4: Team Development

Develop, implement, and teach systems for team play that fit your players’ strengths and abilities.

Our system of play must take into account not only what each player does well, but also our depth, what it will take to win in our conference, against our schedule, and in season ending tournament play.

This is something that our staff works on throughout the year, but once we have selected the team, it is time to

tweak and implement our system of play around the abilities of our players. It is an ongoing process throughout the games season. We do not make wholesale adjustments, but will add in wrinkles, or subtract things that aren't working as well as we thought they would when we included them as a part of our scheme.

This is a philosophical decision that you must make as a coach, but my philosophy is that we are going to utilize systems of play and structure our areas that we emphasize in practice, that give us the best chance to advance in our season-ending state tournament. As an example, if we know we're going to have to beat a team that runs flex in our first round of the state tournament (referred to as the sectional in Indiana), then without telling our players what we were doing, we will practice defending the flex all season long. If our pack defense gives us the best chance of winning in the sectional, that is what we play during the season and work at daily. We do not play other styles of defense during the regular season even if they might be effective against one or two regular-season foes.

I refer to this role as team development because not only does it involve our offensive and defensive systems, but it includes team building and team chemistry as well. I just don't think you're going to be able to reach your potential unless there is a cohesion and, camaraderie amongst the players. Obviously, a lot of how well a team gets along has to do with the individual personalities of the players, their past experiences with each other, and the success your team has. But, as coaches we can influence that togetherness by the attitudes that we exhibit and instill in our players, the teambuilding activities that we do, and the emphasis that we put on it.

Area of Focus #5: Role Definition

Assign roles that best fit each players within the system, work to keep them in those roles, and redefine roles as players change or the needs of the team change.

Deciding how each player, each assistant coach, and each manager is going to help the team and then working with that team member to coach them and make them better at that role is crucial. Providing those roles in writing in players and coaches notebooks is a very clear way of giving the direction they need to get started. But, just as important as having a plan to get started is your ability to have a plan to evaluate how each person is performing his or her role, how to keep them within their role and what to do if they grow out of that role.

The toughest role for a player to accept is one of not playing much. I have included a document at the end of this article that I use at the beginning of the season to see what each player's expectations are in the area, and whether or not they match mine.

Area of Focus #6: Coaching Staff Development

Intentional professional development for the entire coaching staff.

- What should be the expectations for our staff?
- How should we split up the responsibilities?
- What is our most effective way to communicate updates on responsibilities?

During the season, it is very tough to spend any time on staff development. Just like you ask your players to

work on their game during the off-season, the coaching staff also needs to sharpen their skills. We believe that there are five areas for each coach to work on and that coaches should have an individual development plan, just like players have an individual workout plan. The five areas to develop are:

1. Technical Knowledge of the game of Volleyball.
2. Ability to teach the game.
3. Ability to build a team.
4. Ability to develop players to bring out the best in them.
5. Leadership Skills

Have a coordinated plan as a staff, so that you have different coaches working in different areas and can share their information so that everyone benefits from each other's work.

Area of Focus #7: Service, Promotion, and Public Relations.

Promoting the program as a whole and the players individually.

This is not the main focus of my roles, but in order to have a complete program, it is an area where you and your staff do need to give some thought and some time to.

We don't do complicated things, but strive to build relationships between our players and our community. We have a simple web site promoting our program, write a simple pre-season media guide and make copies at school to hand out at games, run summer youth camps, have a father/son one day summer clinic on the Saturday before father's day, have an autograph night where our players sign our game programs for anyone who is interested. We schedule all of these a year in advance so that we have the facilities and administrative blessings that we need.

Summary

The key to the success in these seven areas, and ultimately your volleyball team and program is your ability to visualize what you want in each of the seven key result areas, write long range, yearly, monthly, and daily goals and tasks, and then implementing them through the work of everyone in your program.

Written By Brian Williams (bwilliams@volleyballtoolbox.net)