



How College Ministry Teams are Like Sports Teams

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Growth in ministry is always exhilarating! Having more there than last year, starting a new small group, having to set out “overflow” seating; all of these things keep you coming back! It’s surfing the wave of chaos! But transitions can also be really hard. It’s hard moving from a “small group Bible study” to a “large group weekly meeting.” And boy, you can tell when you prepared for one and showed up at the other! It’s the same way with your student leaders and your staff. The art of leading as a single staff looks different then when you have a large student leadership team behind you. I didn’t realize this when I started in ministry. A HUGE mistake.

We began our ministry with about six students. Today we have six on staff. The dynamics are very different when you are a single staff and deeply know all five people around you to having a staff and having student leaders you don’t know very well. The transitions a growing ministry can face can damage your relationships and isolate core people in your ministry if you don’t know how to implement change and articulate it. I learned that the hard way! We lost some of our best student leaders and future staff because I didn’t know how articulate the changes we were having to make in order to move the ministry forward.

In short, I didn’t know what game we were playing and as a result, my team didn’t know either. There were several casualties - both on the student side and the staff side. Then I came across a book called *Sticky Teams* by Larry Osborne that helped me understand the tensions and frustrations I was feeling - or more importantly-my teams were feeling. Do you know what game you’re playing? Below are the four types of leadership teams and the transitions between them that a leadership team or staff can go through.

RUNNING TRACK

Track, for the most part, is an individual sport. You train. You run. You do well or you don’t. There aren’t a whole lot of people involved in the process of decision making. You win, you get the glory and you know what happened. If something goes horribly wrong you are the first one to know. Starting a ministry or being a single staff can be a lot like running track. You pick the hours, your staff meetings happen in your head and you make the decisions. You know what’s going on in every aspect of your ministry because you ARE your ministry, at this point. You know you are running track when you are doing everything, all the time for every event your ministry does.

GOLF BUDDIES

God willing as your ministry has begun to grow you’ve had 3-4 join you in ministry. This might be a few solid students who buy into your vision. You’ve transitioned into a group effort, but it’s like playing golf with your buddies. It’s more about the fun and the friendship than it is about the game. Everybody knows everybody and is on the same page because everybody weighs in on every decision. You don’t really need to have



leadership meetings because everybody sees everybody all the time and is at everything because it takes everybody to pull off whatever it is you are doing. Have you been a part of this ministry? There are five of you and you all are at every event because it takes all of you to pull it off? You know each other inside and out. You are golf buddies. Transitioning from track to golf buddies is fairly smooth. You are grateful for the help and your team is grateful that you've let them into your life and they have some buy-in with the ministry. You and the team are all together, working together, to put on everything your ministry is doing. But eventually your team may grow and it's harder to be best buds and keep everyone involved with around 7-20 people.

BASKETBALL

Basketball is a great sport. Everybody on the court can do the basics, but we see some are better at others so they have specialized roles. There are people who start and people are very needed, but they come off the bench. There are those that shoot better and those that are better at defense. There are some players who everybody knows they are the go-to-guy when the game is on the line. Eventually, your ministry team may grow to where you have certain people on your team leading out in specific areas. Everybody may be at your outreach table, but one person may be in charge of the vision for it. You begin to see people you need to invest in more because they have higher potential and drive, so you invest more regularly in them than you would with other people on the team.

This is very different than golf. Everybody plays all the time in golf and everybody sees what is going on. In basketball, everybody sees what is going on, but not everybody plays or even plays the same role. In your ministry now you have people you know better than others, their strengths are apparent as well as their weaknesses. When you transition from golf to basketball you will need to be aware of your former golf buddies. Chances are some of them may feel abandoned because of the lack of access to you or upset by the lack of influence they have.

When we made the transition from golf to basketball we lost several of our student leaders because we made two changes and didn't realize the rules of the game had changed and failed to help our students see it. First, we were now multiple staff so our younger staff met with some of our student leaders who were accustomed to or expected meeting with me. See what happened? They were used to having an all-access pass to the leader. Now they were meeting with another staff. Was I still available if they needed me? Of course, but it "seemed" like I was distant. It had to happen. I couldn't meet with 15 people! But we didn't address the "why" behind their feelings. We didn't see it. They felt second class and eventually stepped out of leadership and some of them left our ministry all together.

Secondly, we stopped making certain decisions as a student leadership team and began to make some of those decisions in a formal meeting with only a few people. Student leaders who once sat at the "decision-making" table felt like they were left out. We didn't realize it till they left. They felt like it wasn't their ministry. But it had to be done. Can you imagine talking t-shirt design or a theme for Fall Retreat with 10-15 people?

If you find yourself struggling to make decisions because of too many "chefs in the kitchen", chances are, you are trying to play golf with a basketball team. You are going to need to delegate and limit the seats at the table, BUT be sure to help explain this to your team and be very, very sensitive to those who will struggle with



the transition. This is something you talk about it before it happens, talk about it while it is happening, and debrief those affected by it after it happened. In my mind, this was the hardest transition to make for the team, but football can be the hardest transition for the leader.

FOOTBALL

Football is a highly specialized sport. You have athletes who only block or only kick. There are those whose job is to tackle the quarterback and others whose job is to protect the quarterback. If you notice while the defensive is on the field the offensive is huddled up planning their next series not even watching the game! Everybody has the same end goal to win the game, but they have different roles to complete the goal. Same goal, different roles. We see this in larger ministries where they have a leadership core of about 20+. As the leader you have to transition from being a basketball coach to being a head football coach. You have to let go of certain aspects of your ministry and allow others to lead out in a specific ministry and the implementation of that vision.

A NFL head coach doesn't call all the offensive plays or call out all the defensive formations. He has trusted leaders who know the vision of the team who he trusts. The head coach is looking at the big picture and making minor adjustments to keep the team moving forward to the goal. Likewise, you shouldn't be doing everything or attending everything. Let your leaders lead and your staff, if you have any, staff. You brought them on because they were awesome, so let them be awesome! In ministry this is sometimes difficult for the leader because we feel this expectation to know "everything" that goes on in our ministry. The truth is, you shouldn't have to. With a team this size you shouldn't be at every outreach and small group. You shouldn't be leading at every event. If you have to be the first one there and the last one to leave and at every event, then you are probably the bottleneck for growth in your ministry and you are stunting the growth of the leaders on your team.

Transitioning to this model is usually much harder on the leader than on the leadership team. Your team will talk about how they don't feel connected to everyone like they used to. That is because they are used to everyone knowing what is going on all the time. You will need to find a way for your leadership team to communicate and share what God is doing so your leaders can hear how God is moving across the whole of the ministry. For us, we stopped expecting all of our small group leaders to be at all of our outreaches. We didn't require all of our outreach teams to be at our small groups. Our expectations of our student leaders became, be involved in discipleship, do whatever your piece of the ministry pie is with excellence, and be at the leadership team meeting. Besides that, come to what you can and do what you can, but it isn't required. It was like we unleashed a wave of talent and innovation! Our students began to make more ownership in their ministries and made it all better. Do I know everything that is going on in our ministry? No. But I do know and trust the leader of each of those ministries who I can find out what is going on in that ministry.

Transitions are hard! I get it. How we handle transitioning with our leaders can either set us up for failure or success. It can mean the difference from a student stepping up and being your next staff member or walking away feeling burned.

What sport are you currently playing? What steps do you need to implement to transition well?