

RUNNING A BETTER ORGANIZATION

WHY I OFFER MY KNOWLEDGE AND ADVICE

Grand Valley State University, Spring, 1990 –

As I sat there bare-assed on the floor looking at the tile, exhausted, defeated and humiliated, I contemplated how I had arrived at that moment of utter embarrassment. I thought about what I had done as a program leader to set myself up for it. I thought about the frustration of being involved with a sport I had invested in heavily being a low priority to the university I was representing and the role that played in my exhaustion. I wanted to win so badly, and did everything in my power and my sphere of influence at the time, but was getting nowhere, really. Things had to be different.

Like many collegiate club rowing athletes who found rowing in college, the rowing bug bite me hard my freshman year. That infection intensified throughout my college career and to say that I was completely consumed with it by the time I was a senior in college is an understatement. I was extremely ambitious, and took on officer roles each of my varsity squad years at Grand Valley, culminating with being elected the team president my senior year.

Our program at GVSU (was GVSC until my senior year) had been a varsity sport until it was dropped in 1982 and the school retained the equipment and pole-structure boathouse and gifted it to the student government where it could exist as a club sport if the student body wanted to have one. After dropping it only a few athletes from the varsity team stayed on and kept the program alive. However those who stayed, which included my freshman year coach, had no experience running a student-run rowing club and there were a lot of challenges the initial group faced that their varsity experience had not prepared them for. The loss of support thrust upon them a situation that eventually caused a lot of conflict and drove a lot of people away. By the time I arrived at Grand Valley in the fall of 1986 the program was in full-fledged club mode, one four-year generation having cycled through, and the residue of the varsity years only left hanging in bits of paraphernalia and equipment in the pole barn on the Grand River we called home.

My ambitions lead me to dream of making the national team and I started training in addition to our daily practices, all based on literature USRowing was distributing written by Kris Korzienowski, the U.S. National Team Coach at the time. My last three years on the team we had a coach who was part-time due to work and family obligations, and all of the main administrative work and decisions were left up to the officers, as the university mandated student-run situation called for anyway. Pretty much all the work outside of practice was done by student-officers and the coach showed up and conducted practices, which is a common “clubby” model used by club rowing teams (among other club sports) even today. We were somewhat self-taught on rowing in addition to managing team operations. Korzo’s writing supplied me with most of my training knowledge and workout examples until I got to a summer program run by Jim Dietz in the summer of 1990.

By my junior and senior years I had also taken on coaching duties for novices. This disastrous practice of having varsity athletes coach novices was common at Grand Valley and other club programs of the day. In addition to classwork (classwork??), varsity practices, doing extra workouts on my own, being the team president, and a novice coach, I also held down a part-time job stocking groceries third shift at Meijer on weekends and a few nights a week to pay for all of my school expenses. It was an experience I had while working this job one Saturday night that led to some life changing and personal enlightenment that in hindsight prepared me for the coach and leader I am today. Allow me to entertain you for a few pages. . .

Our team committed to hosting a spring regatta in early April of 1990 called “The Great Lakes Sprints” (which has since evolved into today’s Lubber’s Cup regatta). I served as regatta director and about a dozen teams came. Anyone who has hosted a regatta knows that it is a lot of exhausting work acquiring the resources needed, permits, volunteers, etc. We had things pretty organized for a bunch of college kids, and all my teammates chipped in to get stuff done.

The early April day was a cold and windy one. I raced a few times myself, coached the novice men through the day, and was in charge of the regatta details. Only getting a few hours of sleep in the previous few days due to classwork, training, work and regatta preparations, by the days end I was thoroughly exhausted. Completely wiped physically. Things pulled off OK, despite the weather, but by the time the last stakeboat was put away it was nearly 10pm, we having finished just in time for me to get to Jenison and start my third shift job at Meijer. I was starting the night completely wind burnt and beat, and knew that being on my feet all night was going to be rough. 7:00am wasn’t going to come soon enough.

I was normally a pretty good worker, but that night I was not. I was fortunate that I drew one of the easier assignments that night – stocking the paper based products. During the night I fueled myself with anger from memories of an exchange between the director of the GVSU fieldhouse and I earlier that week. Anyone reading this who has either been a coach or an officer of a college club team may have had similar exchanges that I describe next.

Like many college club rowing programs, our indoor training situation was a fluid one where we were stuck wherever they could find space. That year we had our several ergometers stored in a closet off of a lobby area and during certain times of the day we could use the lobby to workout in while facility users passed by on their way in. In the early evening during a designated block I went to do my extra workout that day after I coached the novice guys. It was a very intense short interval workout to prepare for a 2,000 meter test on an ergometer, as I had a test to be done for national team testing in a few weeks. Half-way through the workout I was humming, having a great workout and producing the scores I was targeting. I was looking forward to smashing the second half and gaining the confidence for the upcoming 2,000 meter test, which was a new distance used for testing, different from the 2500 meter testing used in previous years.

After a one minute piece and during my one minute of rest the building manager whose name was Mike came busting into the lobby, clearly angry. He approached me asking, “What are you doing!?!?” I had had numerous interactions with this guy in my years as an officer, and especially over the last year as the team president as I directly dealt with facility scheduling matters. He never failed to let me know we were not a priority and that we were supposed to be a recreationally based club. That I was goal-driven

seemed to irritate him, especially when I would do things like request more time for the program. He was dismissive most of the time. I didn't like him, nor did anyone on our team who had interactions with him. So that he was pissed with me was not a surprise, but what was irking was that I was in there during one of our designated times. What I didn't know was that he had canceled our time that night as there was an outside group renting an area of the building (not even the area I was in) and there was a *chance* they could walk through the lobby area we trained in. He claimed to have called and left a message with someone's roommate (no cell phones back then, remember) that our time block was cancelled but no one passed along a message, if there was one.

He sternly told me to stop at that moment, put away the machine, and wipe the sweat off the floor I had produced through half the workout. I pleaded with him, explaining I had a test coming up and I needed to finish the workout. My next minute was upon me and I started to build pressure and rate. At that he ran towards me, yelling now, to "STOP RIGHT NOW IF THE ROWING TEAM EVER HOPES TO USE THE FACILITY AGAIN!!!!!" I stopped, reluctantly, knowing he meant what he said, that he didn't care, and probably would have taken some pleasure with putting our program in its place. Without a thank you or a "sorry about that", he turned and left. It was a reminder that other non-university related groups who brought income were a higher priority than an actual tuition and dues paying student who put all of themselves into what they were doing, with goals of representing Grand Valley at a higher level.

The anger fueled by my thoughts of that incident occupied my mind enough while stocking paper towels and facial tissues to keep some energy up for much of that night. But by 5:00am my exhaustion was getting the better of me and I had nearly fallen asleep kneeling down on a few occasions. By 6:00 when I went to the restroom in the back of the store near our breakroom and sat down on the toilet my fate was sealed.

My next memory was of my manager Jerry shaking my hand trying to wake me up. After sitting down on the throne I had fallen asleep immediately, collapsed over, torso laying on my thighs, arms dangling onto the floor, pants at my ankles. I had been asleep for 45 minutes before a co-worker came in, saw my arms below the stall, and couldn't revive me by yelling at me. He had ran to a nearby phone and called a "Code 11" to the breakroom bathroom, meaning there was a medical emergency which harkened my manager along with several workers to my aid.

Jerry yelled out my name and pulled on my hand forcefully by reaching under the stall. At that I woke up, startled. Realizing I had fallen asleep on the job and my manager had caught me, my surprised reflex made me stand up immediately to pull up my pants and get back to work, still unaware a number of people were standing outside the stall. Sitting in that position for so long my legs had fallen asleep and were useless. I fell forward unable to stand, and on my way down reached up and caught the top of the stall door with my hands, holding on to keep upright. In a frantic effort to get my numb legs and feet underneath me and stand, I pulled myself up and that struggle caused me to unlatch the stall door. The door swung open with me hanging on to it, my bare ass greeting Jerry and my coworkers as I pivoted around hanging on to the door. As the stall door hit the brick wall behind it my fingers pinched between the door and the wall and I let go, falling to the floor in a half-nude heap, legs still useless. It was a scene out of a Seinfeld episode. After my proclamation of being OK and that I had just fallen asleep, Jerry sent my coworkers back to their jobs, told me to punch out and go home when I was ready, and then left himself.

There I sat, bare ass against the tile floor, trying to gain composure, the thoughts running through my head. I had bitten off more than I could chew that year. I was trying to do too many things. As a program leader I failed to delegate anything, even when teammates offered help. I would get caught up in trying to manage the minutia and spend precious energy on unimportant things. I would make unpopular decisions without involving other board and team members. They would often be self-serving and not for the betterment of the team. I always lacked sleep due to being so busy, so physically I had hit my limits, lead to that state by my lack of administrative prowess and unbridled ambitions.

I felt extreme frustration. The exchange with the building manager that week was just one example of many driving home that we were a lesser priority than others. It was clear where we stood in the hierarchy of the university. And despite my efforts and requests for more support, it was all-too-easy for university administrative-types like Mike to dismiss me, knowing I would soon be gone and graduated soon, and that he was judged more by the masses of other users of the facility he managed and their good reviews being his avenue for promotions, raises, and more university support. People in that administrative position just need to be skilled with telling people no, not wanting to create more work for himself and others, knowing the revolving door of people would eventually carry the occasional strong-willed passers-through away from them, and with them the will to push for more. We were stuck in this cycle where institutional memory favored the administration who had most of the authority and could just wait it out.

My extreme motivation lead me to do more and more and more until in my exhausted state I found myself inadvertently mooning my coworkers. I would have loved to have a coach who could just run the program while my teammates and I could focus on being a team, pushing our limits in practice rather than fighting each other over various aspects of team operations. Unfortunately the situation at the time called for the “students to run the program” and I was put into that position, willingly, because I knew for things to get done right I had to do it (see above admission). Something had to change.

I tell the above story because I know that through history there have been scores of other student officers and coaches of club teams of all different types of sports who can tell similar stories. Those who have run themselves into the ground physically dealing with a lack of resources, frustrations and humiliations of being dismissed, and lectured and force-fed university and/or departmental philosophy, Those who have tried their best to make their situation better only to have been left with their bare ass sitting on cold tile after falling asleep on the toilet. And all-the-while had tempestuous relations between team members, officers, coaches, rec sports personnel, alumni, university administration and the public sector. If what I have written sounds familiar I empathize, and I dedicate this section to you.

IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THAT WAY

I write this next section from perspective gained through 30 years of experience of being a student-athlete myself in a club, an officer, a coach, and an administrator. I have dealt with every level of university administration at both my university and others. I have had many, many, many discussions with other officers and coaches and club sport administrators over my career from different institutions, and I can't even begin to count the number of inquiries I have had asking “how we do things”. It was one of my motivations for writing this manual as there seems to be a lot of people struggling with it. Especially through my time as the ACRA President, I have gained a thorough understanding of the issues surrounding club sport teams and their dynamics of operations. This has allowed me to coach my own team (and university to some degree) to success along the way. I can also tell you that even now the

frustrations and challenges still keep coming - we just handle them better. It doesn't have to always be a fight – just sometimes.

I hate to say it this way, but this fight primarily exists within the university itself. In most situations the university has set up a system that causes a lot of conflict within the club; sometimes it may even be intentional. Other times this conflict is known about and dismissed because it is a low priority. And conflict is natural, but a lot of conflict is a program killer. It eats away at the morale of a program, and scares people away from it. It is a major reason people quit your team.

I write this for public consumption so you can minimize conflict in your organization. This is the meat and potatoes part of this manual, because it addresses the things that differentiate club programs from varsity programs – the actual functioning of the team and how it relates to how you go about your business. It mostly addresses things that you have control over – unfortunately the hierarchy of your university is usually beyond your immediate sphere of influence. I also realize that some club sport administrators will likely read these words, lead to this book by some of their ambitious officers and alums who urge them to read my advice. I will eventually talk about the dynamics at play here between administrators and team leadership, but to those administrators do know I do have a thorough understanding of the difficult position you have been put in. I write this section for you to benefit by applying certain methods to your unique situation. I write this section for the student-officers as well as the coaches so you can implement a better way of doing things. These are time-tested methods I have employed and had a great deal of success with.

It doesn't always have to be a fight.

SECTION UNDER CONSTRUCTION