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**The Reality of Challenges with Organizational Change**

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***The ASEP Vision***

**What the organization**

**wants to be?**

To be recognized as the leading professional organization of American scholars and practitioners in the study and application of exercise physiology to fitness, health promotion, rehabilitation, and sports training.

The future of exercise physiology is here with us now. We just don’t seem to get what we should do with it or what is expected of us. And strangely enough, or perhaps, not so strange is the slow speed at which change has occurred. Understandably, it is a well-known fact that change is a process across many decades. That is why 12 years later the founding of the American Society of Exercise Physiologists is still hitting home (i.e., the reality that change is not an event).

From the beginning, ASEP was founded to promote professional development of exercise physiologists. It is still the ASEP purpose. Yet, while its founding could be considered as the most appropriate professional and political move possible to exercise physiologists, many academic exercise physiologists are still investing in the hopelessness of the sports medicine and exercise science mentality. It is neither their professional organization nor the right organization for exercise physiologists, and still they attend to it for what seems to be the fear of leaving. Talk about a troubled body of individuals.

As students graduate from college to be consumed by tuition loans and other financial responsibilities, they will finally get the point that a college degree should render them a job. But, of course, this isn’t true with exercise science. Profoundly uncertain about their future, often they find themselves knocking on the doors of college once again. This time they major in physical therapy, nursing, or some other proven major that delivers on its promise of a career with a stable financial salary. After a few months into the degree program, they see the difference and the purpose behind going to college and a career option after college. No wonder they gradually begin to smile and relax after being deceived for so many years. After all, exercise science is a meaningless college investment with real dollars that must be paid back [1].

Even though I have written extensively on exercise physiology professionalism [2], I am not completely blind to the negative realities of indifference and groupthink. The latter, in particular, is extremely powerful. Meanwhile, academic exercise physiologists remain locked in the inertia of its old existence. While the old rules of thinking as an exercise physiologist have slipped somewhat, they are still with us and, unfortunately, they are the reason students find it so hard to locate a credible healthcare job. The static blueprint of the sports medicine model isn’t just outdated, it is obsolescent.

From this brief introduction, it is clear that exercise science and exercise physiology are not synonymous. The old rules of doing business are just that – old rules! Today’s thinking within ASEP is designed around the idea that effective leadership is a vital prerequisite to sustain the transition of exercise physiology from a discipline to a profession. The latter way of thinking will move exercise physiology forward, regardless of the almost overwhelming challenges to do so. But, first, there must be some demonstrated passion to push forwards.

***The ASEP Vision***

**What it wants to accomplish?**

The Society of Exercise Physiologists is dedicated to unifying all exercise physiologists in the United States and worldwide to promote and support the study, practice, teaching, research, and development of the exercise physiology profession.

**Whom it wants to serve?**

Through proactive and creative leadership, the Society empowers its members to serve the public good by making an academically sound difference in the application of exercise physiology concepts and insights.

Perhaps, one starting point is for exercise physiologists to take a serious look at what they know about professions and professional development, especially the factors that keep them from joining ASEP. While a strategy is always important to move things along, it may be as simple as answering the following question: As an academic exercise physiologist, am I responsible to sports medicine or exercise physiology? If, in fact, a person feels more commitment to sports medicine, then it is reasonable to conclude that the individual isn’t thinking straight.

In a nutshell, regardless of the fact the majority of the academic exercise physiologists work in departments that are not exercise physiology, their responsibility is nonetheless to the profession of exercise physiology. This is true of the athletic trainer who works in a department of exercise science. He knows that ultimately athletic training is at the center of what he does and who he is responsible to. When understood in this context, it is apparent that exercise physiologists face but one decision and that is to do something to support and nurture the profession of exercise physiology.

***Key Point.*** As long as the ASEP leadership continue to nurture “out of the box” thinking and resiliency, the new paradigm provides the backdrop against which exercise physiology will survive the change process.

Uncertainty of this thinking is always limiting. It goes nowhere, leaving everyone lost in the fog. To avoid continuing to work and living in this way, it is the responsibility of each person to think differently, to be more flexible, more aware, and more resilient. This may not be the only way, but it is an important way to get on with the professional development of exercise physiology. It is also an important way to help ensure that the profession not only survives but grows and prospers.

The truth is that the existing collective professionalism within exercise physiology falls short of what is needed to push the change process forwards (i.e., at least not in a reasonable time period). Hence, students are going to continue their emotional hardship after college graduation for many years to come. Exercise physiologists must come together to repair the problems that associate with the lack of a vision. By problems, I mean the throwing in with the American College of Sports Medicine [3]. It is a shame that no one in 1954 and no one today within ACSM seems to care for non-doctorate students who want to be exercise physiologists. Instead, while the ACSM certifications benefit ACSM and the organization’s bottom line, the leaders have not positioned students of exercise science or sports sciences or even kinesiology majors in a favorable career position.

Whether it is through greed, neglect, or ignorance, the participants in this kind of thinking have in effect abused the ultimate purpose underlying the huge tuition cost to attend college. The implications are far reaching, and they have been known for several decades now. Most obviously, congestion in the fitness market has exacerbated the job market. Although little discussed by academic exercise physiologists, there hasn’t been a job market for so-called students of exercise physiology or related majors for decades. The crisis has spread now across 30 or more similar undergraduate academic degrees, hitting students of these programs especially hard [4].

*The ASEP Mission Statement*

The **American Society of Exercise Physiologists,** the professional organization representing and promoting the profession of exercise physiology, is committed to the professional development of exercise physiology, its advancement, and the credibility of exercise physiologists.

***Key Point.*** A new organizational mindset is required to break from the traditional way of thinking about exercise science, kinesiology, and human performance.

In just several years, and often due to the internal thinking within ACSM, various organizations have assumed a dramatically expanded role in certifications and now even more so in accreditation. Those who run these organizations have gone to great lengths to establish a sustaining connection with the membership, to support individual interests (like cardiac rehabilitation) whose failure in the American Association of Cardiovascular and Pulmonary Rehabilitation [5] has posed serious risk in job security; all to prevent a deep economic downturn in organizational profits. Members can expect higher fees to pay for these moves, as well as for other changes.

In contrast, what is needed should be obvious. There is the need for greater flexibility to create strategic and tactical options specifically for the development of the profession of exercise physiology. There is the need for the college teachers to develop a sharper awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses in regards to supporting the ASEP organization. And, it is more than obvious that academic exercise physiologists need to make the ASEP organization their place for building credibility into the undergraduate exercise physiology major. In fact, it is time they abandoned the old idea that they can reliably promote exercise physiology from outside of the ASEP model.

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A vivid imagination compels the whole body to obey it.

-- Aristotle

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Exercise physiologists must take a more imaginative approach to planning for the future. In particular, they should develop several coherent, multipronged strategic-action plans to promote the profession of exercise physiology. Each plan should embrace all of the functions that lead to increased flexibility and plausible outcomes in today’s health, fitness, rehabilitation, and athletic environment. Greater flexibility also means developing as many options as possible that can be exercised either when trigger events occur or the future becomes more certain. Often, options will be offensive moves. That is, what new thinking best fits different scenarios? As the ASEP leadership and existing professions prepare for increased involvement in healthcare opportunities, they should create options to maintain good financial health under increasingly difficult circumstances.

Better organizational intelligence promotes faster, more effective decision making as well. However, to get good intelligence, organizations need a network, typically led by someone with strong support from the top. This person’s mandate should include creating “eyes and ears” across organizations and areas of overlap (such as another organization’s response to specific internal developments, whether it is certification, accreditation, or a code of ethics). A network is critical because information is useful if it moves not just vertically, but also horizontally. Assembling information, facts, and anecdotes helps ASEP to make sense of what is happening.

**Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is a process. Working together is success.**

-- Henry Ford

This is the moment that academic exercise physiologists redefine and reprioritize the use of exercise as medicine to increase its impact on healthcare. Other organizations are seizing the moment to express control over exercise, to reexamine the power of exercise from the exercise physiologist’s perspective, including foreseeable income using the fee-for-service approach, or to change the mix of marketing strategies and healthcare models in response to the rising cost of traditional healthcare and the growing effectiveness of exercise as prescribed by exercise physiologists. The future of “exercise as medicine” should belong to the ASEP organization whose members are carefully prepared to nurture the health and well-being of clients and patients.

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| A key component to all change is a vision that is compelling, lifting, and to the point. The ASEP leaders believe their vision is such a vision. They believe it is rooted in the core purpose to help students, to help the profession and to help society. |

Further, the ASEP leaders’ strategy should be to develop and update every opportunity to promote themselves as experts in the prescription of exercise to shape and strengthen health and emotional well-being. Objectives and goals should be broad enough to assist with the professional development and application. They should always be straight to the point and helpful rather than potentially problematic or obtuse. They should also help motivate the membership. And, when they are no longer useful, they should be changed and updated. The goals should help each member with questions such as: (a) Do we really want to change our way of thinking? (b) Are we ready to embrace change? (c) Do we have the courage and energy to sustain the change process?

A shared vision [6] is critical to the growth of the organization. This requires agreeing on the vision and mission statements, and embracing individually and collectively the tensions that fuel change and help to master the new way of thinking. After all, if a person’s thinking fails to change, then nothing has changed. Individuals must learn to think differently if they are to understand their assumptions and reasons for changing. Thinking and acting differently aren’t easy to learn, especially when key figures from the other side aren’t interested in changing. Clearly, though, with time and decades of work, there is usually an acquired capacity to think and act in new synergistic ways.

What is apparent is this: The ASEP leaders’ vision requires collaboration among exercise physiologists. While force is inappropriate, passion is everything. Behind every great organization is passion and enthusiasm. This doesn’t mean there will not be challenges and failures. There will always be ups and downs with future-oriented visions. But as long as the vision is grounded in the new organizational paradigm, the leaders will be able to harness the necessary emotional energy to drive the change process. It is as Margaret Mead said, but stated in a different context:

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed *[exercise physiologists]* can change the *[profession]*.

The ASEP leaders understand the immediate needs of the students and other exercise physiologists. That is why they have provided a clear direction about how the profession should grow [7]. They understand the meaning of the Chinese proverb, “When you see what is right, then have the courage to do it.” That is why the leadership has made difficult but important choices and decisions that haven’t always been easy. They realize the reality of change is to deal with the challenges, regardless of the discomfort of changing how we think and what we do.

Consider, for example, the names of three people, Cynthia Cooper of WorldCom, Coleen Rowley of the FBI, and Sherron Watkins of Enron, who were named in 2002 by *Times Magazine* as its persons of the year thanks to their courage to speak out against the misconduct and unscrupulous actions of their respective organizations [8]. As Lacayo and Ripley [9] put it, “They took huge professional and personal risks to blow the whistle on what went wrong at WorldCom, Enron, and the FBI. In doing so, they help to remind us what American courage and American values are all about.”

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| There will always been power, politics, and greed just around the corner doing what they can to upset and take from the organizational life of ASEP. Just remember that change is ongoing; a constant that is the exercise physiologist’s reality. |

The ASEP leadership has certainly made tough decisions and done what it can to blow the whistle on the inappropriateness of continuing within the ACSM organization. They also stand firm that exercise physiologists must come together to support the ASEP effort, its entrepreneurial thinking, and to bolster trust and passion to build the profession. The challenges are not going away. There will always be individuals who are powerful and who are good at politics just around the corner doing what they can to upset and take from the organizational life of ASEP or similar organizations. Just remember that change is always ongoing; a constant that is the exercise physiologist’s reality.

Acting as stewards of the profession, members of ASEP help to manage the process of change. They do so knowing the inherent risk and the strong competitive position of others. In fact, a few ASEP members have actually been threatened to discontinue their association with ASEP or else they may not get tenure. Clearly, articulating a bold new vision is not without its significant risks and challenges. Therein is the problem, the dilemma of making a fundamental shift from yesterday’s thinking. From a pragmatic standpoint, it is sobering to reflect on the fact that disagreement and even bitterness are always part of building a new organizational infrastructure to harness and grow a more sound professional conscience, enhance member motivation towards professionalism, and sustain a stronger long-term view of exercise as medicine.

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