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**ASEP: A Learning Organization!**

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An organization is a family of members committed to a dream. That’s why it is always important to believe in the impossible, especially when no one else done.

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**HE TITLE OF THIS ARTICLE** is probably not all that important to most academic exercise physiologists, and yet it should be. Aside from the usual membership with ACSM, CSCS, and a few others, ASEP is still the new kid on the block. The challenge of every organization is surviving its outdated thinking and practices. Even after slightly more than a decade of existence, the ASEP leadership is continually doing what it can to be meaningful to its membership and, of course, to exercise physiology.

Peter Senge [1] said learning organizations are: “…organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.” His point is that only those who are flexible, adaptive, and productive will take the organization to the next level.

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| *The trick is to set goals and go after them, much like running a 4-minute mile. It can be done.*  |

The next level is the equivalent of being part of a team or membership that is engaged in doing something that is believed to be the single most important thing in their lives. For the ASEP exercise physiologists, it is the opportunity to re-create: What is exercise physiology? Who is an exercise physiologist? To re-create is to share in the desire to adapt and continually enhance the profession of exercise physiology. It concerns itself with a shift of the mind from thinking as a member of a discipline to thinking as a profession, from thinking as an exercise specialist to thinking as a healthcare professional.

The cornerstone of the ASEP leaders’ thinking is the coming together of important facets of professionalism in order to make sense of the academic degree. It is the understanding of professionalism that integrates the efforts of the ASEP organization, including a code of ethics, accreditation, board certification, and standards of practice. Collectively, these professionalism statements provide a coherent body of thinking that separates the board certified exercise physiologist from the fitness instructor or the personal trainer.

However, what should be obvious for academic exercise physiologists isn’t the case at all. Many continue to focus on historical sports medicine parts of their work (e.g., discipline, certification, and research) rather than seeing the whole and, therefore, they fail to see exercise physiology as a profession. The failure to see exercise physiology from the ASEP perspective creates problems. Note that the non-ASEP certifications may improve individuals in the short-term but, ultimately, there are major long-term problems. For example, continuing to certify exercise science graduates as fitness instructors or personal trainers may produce a quick job in Bob’s Gym, but it can damage the graduate’s long-term opportunities (such poor salaries without healthcare benefits).

Since the 1950s with the founding of the ACSM organization, the academic exercise physiologist’s association and support of sports medicine have resulted in significant visibility for the organization. Their association with ACSM has also benefited academic exercise physiologists as researchers. However, when one looks deeper, the association reveals that the consequences of the academic exercise physiologist’s actions have delayed the development of the profession of exercise physiology. In doing so, there is an obvious ignoring of concerns, particularly, the lack of credible jobs for thousands of college graduates who major in exercise science, kinesiology, and one of the 30 or more undergraduate academic degrees.

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| *You can’t solve a problem unless you first admit you have one.**-- Harvey Mackay* |

Anyone who is willing to take a step back to see what the sports medicine practices have been for the past several decades can easily see that students come up time after time on the short end of the stick. Even now after many years of turning the AACPR organization over to nurses, it is clear that the rehabilitation dimension of exercise physiology is failing. The state of cardiac rehabilitation may well be mastered by exercise physiologists when it comes to the exercise prescription, but it is clear that cardiac rehabilitation is under the control of nurses and physical therapists. Given its existence in the hospital setting that benefits the hospital’s economic base versus years ago in which academic exercise physiologists controlled the university rehab setting, exercise physiologists have in effect lost control of it.

Personal mastery beyond helping patients required exercise physiologists to discipline themselves “professionally speaking,” whereby they understood the need to clarify and deepen their own personal vision for all exercise physiologists. Unfortunately, their focus was not on developing the profession. And, doing one more research study to present at a regional meeting has failed to help the graduates find credible jobs (i.e., defined as a decent salary with healthcare benefits). Seeing the reality of exercise science (and related degree programs) today is objective evidence of the incompetence and the failure to pursue a vision of something better in the future.

Cardiac rehabilitation was at one time at the core of exercise physiology. It represented a special kind of proficiency that is now increasingly dominated by non-exercise physiologists. The opportunity to embrace a vision of something great with high levels of mastery within the profession of exercise physiology was an opportunity of a life time that was pushed aside. Professionalism, thinking right towards the ethical aspects of exercise physiology, is a lifetime process. It is something that keeps people from making stupid mistakes. Professionalism in exercise physiology is a personal and collective commitment to a journey with other established professions. Professionalism is an ingrained understanding, image, and action of entrenched ideas and thinking that transcends its alternative.

Peter Senge [1] said the best, “it’s the capacity to hold a share picture of the future we seek to create.” The capacity to share the future at another level is linked to a shared vision, such as the ASEP vision [2]: “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 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. 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.” The vision tells the reader three things:

1. **What the organization wants to be?**
2. **What it wants to accomplish?**
3. **Whom it wants to serve?**

Why not go back and re-read the vision? As a shared vision, while reading it, allow the mind to create pictures of the future. “To be recognized as the leading professional organization of American scholars and practitioners…” should raise the reader’s enthusiasm and commitment to exercise physiology as a healthcare profession. “…to promote and support the study, practice, teaching, research, and development of the exercise physiology profession…” should significantly improve the opportunity for recognition of exercise physiology as a profession. Such thinking is viewed as part of the change process that aligns and deepens the role of exercise physiologists in healthcare. Any yet, while all of this is good the weak link is the exercise physiology educator who isn’t in a genuine dialogue with colleagues, students, and others to discuss and develop the language of exercise physiology as a profession.

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| *The great military strategist observed that it is the mark inadequate commanders to fail to seize the initiative because they overestimate the strength of their opponents.**-- Von Calusewitz* |

In short, what is needed is the backbone to take on the responsibility for learning how to think as an exercise physiologist. Wouldn’t it be something else to hear the following statement? “Hello, it is a great pleasure to be here with you tonight. I am a board certified exercise physiologist. I have an undergraduate degree in exercise physiology from an academic institution that is accredited by ASEP. No, no, I do not have a degree in kinesiology with a minor in exercise science. No, I do not just call myself an exercise physiologist. I didn’t adopt the title. That would be unethical and unprofessional. Just before graduation, I sat for the ASEP Board Certification exam and passed it. No doubt you have heard of it. As an EPC (i.e., board certified exercise physiologist), I am accountable for upholding the ASEP Code of Ethics. You should also know that what I do in the public sector is governed by the ASEP Standards of Professional Practice. The ASEP thinking, policies, and strategies are at the core of what I do and why I am successful as a healthcare professional.”

What was just described is the big picture of ASEP exercise physiology. In time, the essence of the description will be fully understood throughout the public sector. The focus of ASEP as a learning organization is to enhance the EPC brand recognition and status [3], develop scientific and intellectual knowledge [4], and deliver exercise as medicine to the public. The importance of all three factors is that collectively they represent the knowledge that is unique to the ethical and commercial potential of all board certified exercise physiologists. So, in this context, the ASEP organization and its members exists for the good of society [5]. Choosing service over self-interest is huge [6]. It requires a new way to think about exercise physiology and ASEP as the professional organization of exercise physiologists.

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