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Politics and Exercise Physiology

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The strongest man in the world is he who stands alone.

-- Henrik Ibsen

This article is about how people behave in exercise physiology. In most situations, nearly all the people who are actually exercise physiologists are likely to work in academia. At times they are leaders. Most of the time, they are researchers who attend to teaching if they have to. My focus here is on politics because it exists in exercise physiology and who would have believed it. The term “politics” is complicated, although the intent of organizing a political position is all too often for reasons of consistency, security, or even power. In general, aside from societies, institutional arenas, large and small professional

organizations are political even though the membership may not be aware of the directives.

Every man who is truly a man must learn to be alone in the midst of all the others, and if need be against all the others.

-- Romain Rolland

At times it seems that politics is nothing more than who gets what when the deed is done. Sooner or later the process itself becomes too much. It distorts or strangles the creativity and growth that are necessary for new ideas and directions to take place.

Shouldn't the interaction of people, ideas, and organizations promote justice, decision-making, and accountability? And yet, the capacity for individuals and organizations to change policy, philosophy, and future thinking is all too commonly shaped by politically-driven special interests groups. Even the capacity of a discipline or a profession to grow and prosper is either helped or hindered by the political structure of organizations. The appearance of being professional is difficult to deny, but the political reality is easily felt. It threatens the very essence of democratic governance, thus making it even more difficult to sustain the change process. That is, the concept that drives the professionalization of exercise physiology is one of coherence and accountability. Who wants the latter when it can be used against you? That is the question that needs an answer!

The idea that accountability is only a valued facet of one's character when there are no risks involved is like saying, "I'll run the race but only if I can be assured of the fact that I will win." If such thinking has become the core of how we think and what we do, then, we are already walking around without a head. Organizational leaders must be held accountable for the actions and policies that result in absolute terror on behalf of otherwise innocent people. The means of accountability will no doubt vary considerably, but there must be accountability. Decisions made at the top affect certain people more so than others. Students are especially susceptible to bad politics. In fact, it is more than clear to anyone with his/her eyes open that the emphasis on exercise science is highly correlated with negative career consequences.

We are accountable for our decisions in our personal life so why shouldn't we be just as accountable in our work life.
-- Catherine Pulsifer

The time is upon us that speaking of ideas, sharing beliefs, and performing the essentially impossible task of creating a professional organization for exercise physiologists is important. Doing so is arguably the only logical course of action, however difficult the collective decision might be. The leadership of generic organizations may reach decisions that are efficient for them in an economic sense, but not ones that are in principle fair or ethical to those who are hurt by the

politics. This is why it is important to challenge the conventional ways in which organizational politics has been allowed to practice.

Because there is an oddly paradoxical relationship between the size of an organization and the behavior of the leadership, there is notoriously a big resistance to getting its attention. Thus, if there is an answer to the concerns faced by thousands of students across the United States, it is of two parts. The first part entails an endorsement of a new way to think about exercise physiology. That is, is it a discipline or a profession? The ASEP leaders believe it is a healthcare profession. Thus, such terms as exercise specialist or personal trainers do not

The only real training for leadership is leadership.
-- Antony Jay

address what is exercise physiology or who is an exercise physiologist. The second part entails a commitment to the ASEP change process. It requires exploring possibilities and making a determined commitment to think outside the box.

Various implications stem from these two views.

Is it true that power is always a function of the size of an organization? If so, it can be only for a variable period of time. When properly understood, people grow uncomfortable with doing the wrong thing just because those in a status position believe it is in the best interest of their organization. This kind of behavior is often associated with some kind of a threat to members who argue a different point of view. They may be told to forget tenure at a particular academic institution that is a big supporter of a different view. Fortunately, those with the big guns do not always win. The same is true for those with have amassed a large sum of money and resources to obtain the sort of power they want. They are often referred to as the gatekeepers. In other words, just because they control the majority by its size and resources does not mean that what they are doing is legitimate or even ethical.

The change process is exactly in the middle of the legitimacy myth. Ultimately, there is a loss of confidence in the traditional way of doing things. This leads to instability, especially as the members begin to realize that they are being used to benefit the bottom line of the status quo organization. Often, then,

upon realizing the outcome if left unchallenged, the leadership offers a variety of rewards to keep key individuals happy and compliant. Clearly, the exercise of power is not always a rational and positive authority when it comes to the welfare of the members. It is contrary to the freedom of speech where a person has the right to think as he/she pleases. To criticize an organization is not reasonable even though it can be done in a multitude of ways. Even if a larger organization is never caught saying something negative about a new or small organization, it doesn't mean that the larger organization is free of intervention. There are many other avenues of creating negativity and throwing obstacles in the path of changing.

The secret of happiness is freedom. The secret of freedom is courage.

-- Thucydides (Ancient Greek historians and author, 460-404bc)

While exercise physiologists have the freedom to associate with whomever, is it free as one might think? No, because there are pressure groups to not change and to not think differently. There are implied criticisms for wanting to do something different from the majority, although the majority has been in the wrong on many occasions in the past.

Why the minority turns a deaf ear to this point is hard to understand. Time after time the majority has interposed a layer of confusion between the traditional view and the contemporary way of thinking. Collectively, those who embrace and share the traditional view act as one. This is frequently referred to as the easier path to take since there is likely to be fewer challenges to opinions or actions. After all, no one really likes to feel uncomfortable or look different from the majority. That is life in its many different forms.

An exercise physiologist does not have to be very observant to recognize how reluctant colleagues are to say anything about the establishment, even though they live in a democracy. The degree of freedom that is believed to exist is much less than actually is among individuals of low self-esteem or self-confidence. Thus, as always, problems surface when addressing the issue of politics, power, and greed. There are the questions that center directly on the individual per se. To what degree is he/she in control in the first place? One consequence of low

self-esteem is the inability or lack of desire to make decisions even when they are life threatening. It is not uncommon to find followers doing as they have been told or doing that which they believe will bring them praise or a reward. This in turn keeps them coming back to the same people that feed their defective character. In this way, it is all too easy for them to support the framing of what they are as defined by those in power. Moreover, it is not implausible to argue that after years of feeling inferior, the same people desire perfection and status as though either is the cure.

The crux of the problem is that there now exist a new 21st century way to think about exercise physiology. It is not possible to deny the existence of the ASEP influence to change exercise physiology from a discipline to a healthcare profession. The emergence of new ideas, new thinking, and a completely new way to think about the students' college education isn't a novelty. It is real, and it is here to stay. The real question is this: "When will the academic exercise physiologists pull their heads from the sand?" This is an era of altruistic ideas and work habits, not more selfish dogmas. As they say, "It is time to stop comparing an elephant to a house." The differences between the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) and the American Society of Exercise Physiologists (ASEP) are huge. One is a generic organization and the other is a professional organization. Size isn't the issue and, frankly, there is little to gain by comparing the two organizations on that particular criterion.

And to stick our head in the sand and pretend that we are somehow safer if we do not know or to pretend we are somehow safer if we limit our options seems to me not only foolish but actually dangerous.
-- Mac Thornberry

The differences between ACSM and ASEP are many. Again, what is the point of exercise physiologists belonging to a generic organization of sports medicine rather than their coming together for the same common purpose of building the profession of exercise physiologists? An organization of members with a common identity gives power, direction, and insight to what must be done to empower the membership. It isn't complicated, except for the maintenance and

survival of the politics of an organization. The desire for power and/or position, whether it is an organization or an individual, is often the impetus to engage in behaviors unbecoming to most adults.

How is it that colleagues learn to make others fear them? The answer or at least part of it centers on finding that delicate position needed to survive and to defend one's perception of his/her reality in the context of others. No one wants to find him or herself without food, shelter, money, or status. All of these things and more are necessary to mentally and physically survive the game of life. And yet, trusting others isn't easy. Most people who do so find themselves robbed of

Think About This For A Moment. We're trying to run a 21st century society and economy with 19th century Darwinian, competitive, crude ideas.

-- Susan George

whatever they were able to create. Life among colleagues is a nasty busy, even among those who were persuade (and rightly so) to grasp the extended hand and solution to their previous problems. Thus, what happens is that the individual gives up his/her autonomy (i.e., individualism) for

protection.

Also what happens is that the surrendering of one's autonomy in return for security leaves the person a different human being. In particular, people who share in these kinds of political doings avoid responsibility for their thoughtless and stupid decisions and actions. Political scientists would probably interpret this thinking as a byproduct of exercising power or some equivalent. As an example, read the following by an anonymous writer. "One dark night, a passer-by offered to help an obviously inebriated man who was searching for something under a lamp post. 'What are we looking for?' asked the volunteer helper. 'My keys,' answered the drunk. 'Did you lose them right here?' asked the helper. 'No,' answered the drunk. 'I lost them down the street.' 'Then why are we looking here?' asked the bewildered helper. 'Because the light is better,' the drunk replied.

In other words, the person is interested in avoiding the work that is required to find his keys the hard way. "Light" is very much like the academic exercise

physiologists who find it easier to do their work under the lamppost of ACSM even though it makes no sense doing so. They want what is presently accepted and believed important than to work in the dark even if it makes sense to do so. No one really wants to give up his/her association with ACSM for all the obvious reasons, except when it is necessary in order to promote the profession of exercise physiology.

Theoretically, exercise physiologists can belong to a multitude of organizations of their choice, but such behavior is an indication of failing to do the right thing for the right reason if they aren't supporting ASEP. This judgment is confirmed by the work of dozens of other healthcare professions in spite of the great challenges that the leaders dealt with and continue to do so in an ongoing manner. This, after all, is the message of embedded in the change process. There will always be "cut-throat competitors" who are interested in maximizing their power and wealth.

We are our choices.
-- Jean-Paul Sartre
Being and Nothingness, 1956

What is important is this: Organizational leaders are alone in their ability to exercise political power. Individual exercise physiologists also can check a powerful adversary. Collective action is also important, and that is where the ASEP membership comes into play. The power of a few individuals to mobilize others isn't in debate. However, democracy is a process that takes place across time just as participation in the change process eventually replaces old thinking for new ideas and leaders. Fortunately for the thousands of would-be exercise physiologists, the ASEP leadership has intentionally designed a just, fair, and transparent means to earning the professional title.

There are a few additional points to mention here. First, professionalism isn't something earned without understanding the philosophic infrastructure necessary to acquiring a professional, credible, and politically legitimate stability within the healthcare professions. This thinking is a very important one. Profits are part of the planning of any business or profession, but profits are only a byproduct of what goes on. They are not the very reason for the business itself. Indeed, if *exercise is medicine* as exercise physiologists believe is the case,

professionalism is an important concurrent necessity in the development of credible services to the public sector. For decades to come, all of this and similar thinking will sustain exercise physiologists as healthcare practitioners. This is a strong incentive for the ASEP leaders to continue developing the professional infrastructure to assure that the prescriptive process is always under control.

With a few notable exceptions, the use of exercise is the equivalent of high cost medicine across the healthcare perspective. Meaning simply this, the power of exercise to heal the mind and body extends beyond sports, competition, and big muscles. Here, it is helpful to keep a few points in mind while thinking about such benefits. The subject of exercise as medicine is more complicated than most think. The ASEP board certified exercise physiologists should be the responsible professional to leverage prescriptive exercise against prescriptive medications. It must not be turned over to personal trainers or fitness instructors. While on one hand it reasonable that anyone could oversee exercise, it isn't true. Doing so puts the client and/or patient's health at a considerable risk and cost. Such alienation of professional thinking is a basic problem with sports medicine and other generic organizations.

The membership of ASEP is dedicated to professional unity, shared communication, novel approaches and ideas, and to self-regulation; the true beginnings of professionalization.

-- Lon Kilgore, PhD
Midwestern State University

A similar sports medicine dis-embedding of the professional development of exercise physiology students detaches them from a profession-specific code of ethics and accreditation. The result is a discipline mentality that guarantees a continuation of the same thinking that has choked off new ideas and rights. In short, the failure to follow standard rules and values that institutionalize positive steps toward professionalism create real flaws and serious repercussions in career opportunities and legitimacy. Every profession is supposed to obey the same

rules and thinking. Failing to do so is a high price to pay for an illegitimate resort to power. Fortunately, a trend that is gaining attention as a result of the work of the ASEP leadership is the growing interest in the ASEP board certification. By the same token, however, if someone dares to sit for the exam and pass it, then, that person is responsible to the beliefs and practices that undergird the essence of the exam. That is, the EPCs must share their story and promote ASEP, while acting together with other members to make ASEP a sustainable reality. It is one of the most powerful tools of propaganda.

Free speech means saying, “I don’t agree with the politics that exercise physiologists should support a generic organization and not their own professional organization.” Also, it means valuing dissent when it is necessary to overcome the political power of disruptive behavior. It is not the only solution to supporting the change process, but it is certainly an important beginning. Just as asking the question, “Why are we doing this, and what are we not doing because we are doing these things?” Such thinking challenges exactly the politics as others would expect exercise physiologists to embrace. Thinking matters as does a vision and the courage to act and to succeed. It gives the exercise physiologist the right picture of the future. In the end, it will take a very big imaginative leap to deal with politics. And yet, it is possible to create a more favorable balance between politics and the risks and complexities of dancing the challenges of professionalism.

Why not imagine becoming the new healthcare profession that reduces disability and disease throughout society? Why not imagine becoming recognized as credible healthcare professionals alongside physical therapy, occupational therapy, nursing, and others? All we have to do is to learn how to stand on our own two feet and work hard to explore the possibilities as Oliver Wendell Holmes said, “...the great thing in this world is not so much where we stand, as in what direction we are moving: to reach the port of heaven, we must sail sometimes

The only exercise some people get is jumping to conclusions, running down their friends, side-stepping responsibility, and pushing their luck!

-- Author Unknown

with the wind and sometimes against it – but we must sail, and not drift, nor lie at anchor.”