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Show Some Backbone!

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“He was asked to promote the ASEP organization, but he didn’t. How spineless is he?” – Tara Fulkerson

If exercise physiologists do not learn from their relatively brief history, they shall be compelled to endure it. This is a quote from a friend who is not an exercise physiologist. Unlike exercise physiologists, she understands the array of issues and concerns that confronts exercise physiology as an evolving profession. Not only does she understand the different exercise occupational subcultures and different political perspectives, she has repeatedly stated that exercise physiology must be centralized within its own professional organization. Her observations confirm the impression that either many exercise physiologists do not get it or they are too unprepared, academically speaking, to understand the ASEP effort to deliberately plan for increased career opportunities.

Frankly, this is a very disturbing image of exercise physiologists. It is incredible that they cannot distinguish between sports medicine and exercise physiology (i.e., between the *American College of Sports Medicine* and the *American Society of Exercise Physiologists*). Ironically, it is incredible but not radically different from the rest of society in regards to many societal issues. This deep unwillingness among the gatekeepers to get involved with ASEP represents an aura of permanence. The truth is that the future of exercise physiology no longer lies with sports medicine. And, there is no controversy about this point.

To get an idea of where this brief essay is coming from, here is what I’ve recently learned while reading the book, *Can America Survive?* [1, p. 72]: “Women earned 4 percent of law degrees in 1956; by 1998, they earned 44 percent.” “Women earned less than 1 percent of dentistry degrees in 1952; by 1998, they earned 38 percent.” “Women received 5 percent of the MDs in 1952; by 1998, they took 42 percent.” Women are happy campers more so today than 50 years ago. They understand that much of the old system of thinking is dead, and that a new reality (i.e., a very different paradigm from the one decades ago) now guides our thinking.

To those who do not see the changes they want right now in exercise physiology or who are not willing to recognize that change is an ongoing process, they should study the

power in persistence. Fifty years ago it was not believed that women would (or could) perform well in law, dentistry, or medicine. Obviously, the thinking was wrong even though it was not recognized then. Common statements like “this is the way we have always believed” and “don’t rock the boat” keep people from engaging change. They are afraid of being wrong and, yet nobody’s perfect.

Change is Constant

All change is slow, especially revolutionary changes. But obviously, change is taking place all around us. The ASEP leadership has put into motion unprecedented change; all in less than a decade. This is a statistic that is conveniently ignored by some colleagues. They would rather believe that ASEP should shut its doors or just simply disappear from the face of the earth. However, as pointed out many times in numerous articles published in the *Professional Journal of Exercise Physiology* [2] and the *Professionalization of Exercise Physiology* [online](#) [3], ASEP is here to stay. No one should forget the power in constancy.

Although only one [4] exercise physiology text actually mentions the importance of the *American Society of Exercise Physiologists*, this too will change. The texts [5,6] that do not mention ASEP are much like the thinking of the 1950s regarding the rights of women in the United States. It is just a matter of time that this, too, will change. The principal point here is that [time] is on the side of the ASEP exercise physiologists. To press this point a bit further, significant changes have already begun to emerge at the university level. Neither the “exercise physiologist in the rehab setting” nor the nurse or physical therapy supervisors who represent them can deny the ASEP achievements.

New Thinking is a Required Undertaking

Just think, better than 30 years ago President Richard Nixon signed Title IX of the Federal Education Amendments into law, banning sex discrimination schools receiving Federal funds. The impact on athletics has been especially obvious. Stein and DeMuth [1, p. 76] state in their excellent book that, “In 1972, there were only two female athletic teams (of any type) on average per college; by 2000, there were more than eight female teams per school.” The increase is a dramatic example of new thinking, persistence, and time. The rest of the public may not have been ready but, nonetheless, it was (and still is) a required undertaking.

There is an important reason for new thinking [7]. Undoubtedly, part of the incredible denial of ASEP by the PhD gatekeepers [8] is the exaggerated belief in old thinking that continues today with sports medicine. The gatekeepers’ fascination with research over the fundamental academic needs of their students has reached a point of critical concern. No rational person can fail to be moved by the need to do something about the lack of a solid, credible education for our students. With chilling clarity, that is exactly what the ASEP leadership has done. To be sure, it is now impossible to go back. It is therefore imperative to stay the course.

Persistence Pays Off

Fortunately, the persistence of the ASEP leadership is paying off in many positive ways [9]. It has created a winning strategy based, first, on a new vision and, second, on “what is our core business?” That is exactly why the ASEP leadership developed the first-ever Standards of Professional Practice for exercise physiologists [10]. The leadership understands the importance of accreditation and the fact that it is integrally related to the crisis of exercise science thinking. Ultimately, ASEP will have the last laugh! Abraham Lincoln said it best: “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate for the stormy present and future. As our circumstances are new, we must think anew, and act anew.”

Unlike ASEP members, many academic gatekeepers don't see the world of exercise physiology clearly. They live the quiet past. Thus, unfortunately, they view the field from their personal reflections about the value of research. It sounds pretty ridiculous, doesn't it? The end result is a misdirected philosophy of what is exercise physiology. Their blind obedience to sports medicine is a real threat to the professional education of exercise physiology students, which reminds me of the saying: “None are so blind as those who will not see.”

Change Creates Opportunities

Leaders must believe that change creates opportunities, that conviction strengthens the will, and that action is imperative. These characteristics of a leader are the glue that holds an organization together, that builds a solid foundation for the future, and that keeps us all from being blind to the reality of past thinking. Leaders understand glue, foundation, and reality. They also know that life is about making choices. A person can choose to stay as he has always been or he can change. It is a matter of making choices. Recognition of this can give exercise physiologists the faith they need to face the future.

Fortunately, the power of new thinking is helping to reduce the wastefulness that comes from bias thinking. Likewise, the persistence of a few who understand the culture of exercise physiology [11], who are committed members of the ASEP organization, continues to grip the hearts and minds of student and non-student members alike. This is all a function of time, but with time there is genuine power to become our vision [12]. It is the job of the ASEP leaders to stay the course, to inspire confidence in the membership, and to act on behalf of exercise physiologists to decrease their sense of anxiety, powerlessness, and insecurity. They must dare to confront the possibilities that await exercise physiologists as healthcare professionals.

Staying the Course

Today, like yesterday, and the day before then, ASEP exercise physiologists must be unafraid of the challenges and statements of impossibility or it can be done. However complicated, all we need to do is stay the course [13]. Our inexhaustible passion in building a whole different exercise physiology will pay off. Our message is right for the right reasons. Details are obvious throughout the ASEP website and electronic journals. And yet it is so common to hear the statement: “I've got too much to lose. I've worked hard to get where I am. I'm not going to put my job on the line for ASEP.”

The fear of failure is huge. It is therefore always easier to refuse to let go of a safe way of thinking. Viewed in this light, why take on new challenges and risk mistakes? Why, because failure can teach us many things. For example, we know that our fight is no longer a daring gamble. It is a reality. The ASEP leadership knows that when they say they are going to do something, then, they must do it. That's why the leadership has integrity. They have "done what they said they would do." Having integrity, they have paved a new and credible academic road of success for students who want to be exercise physiologists. They welcome the future with open arms and an open mind, with the anticipation of great things for their students.

The ASEP Perspective

To be sure, the leadership has at times mismanaged criticism but who hasn't? Frustrated, yes, for certain but who isn't? Defensive, sure, but it is clear that they are learning as they go along. There's no doubt, however, that the strength of the ASEP organization lies in its persistence [14]. The damage others have done has been done. This is especially true of the negative comments about the ASEP leadership. There should be no place for such behavior among professionals. What is clear is that we are at competition with other organizations, and we must not forget it [15]. That's why, in part, I keep writing essays like this one to explain the inside view of the ASEP perspective. Professional development must be our first priority. The student is our number-one concern. That's why the leadership is committed above all to student credibility.

I'm proud to be a member of the *American Society of Exercise Physiologists*. I'm sure others are, too. Only in America could these new reflections drive what exercise physiology will become worldwide. Only in America could people like the Robert A. Robergs, Steve Jungbauer, Matthew Wattles, Don Diboll, Matthew Lehns, and others, who come together from different kinds of jobs and personal experiences, have enjoyed the opportunity to contribute to the professional development of exercise physiology. Only in America could we find ourselves believing we have the right to determine our own future and, then, truly do something about it. Only within the ASEP organization we find a breed of leaders committed to a new, tough-minded paradigm -- the professional development of exercise physiology.

"We must cease to be mere spectators and get involved in creating the future of exercise physiology." – Tommy Boone

Sharing Feelings

It's now our job to drill this message home. No longer caught in the sports medicine trap, let us keep our eyes on the prize. Let us stay the course, be persistent until the very end, and inspire whoever is willing to listen. Let us do this because it is our duty, and it is the right thing to do. Let us be relentless in our quest, in our dealing with the struggles to professionalize exercise physiology, even in our moments of foolishness. Let us be grateful of the gift and the right to share our feelings and beliefs [16]. Let us appreciate that we have not uttered pious pronouncements about doing this and doing that as our competitors have done for decades. There is a real dignity in knowing that the ASEP

leadership is doing everything it can to help member meet their own goals and objectives, which is directly related to the growth of exercise physiology.

The power we have lies in our determination and persistence. Time is on our side. Just because a colleague says something negative about ASEP or its leadership, it doesn't make it right. Why not ask for an explanation? If we take the time to ask, then it is possible we may help others to understand our point of view. The bottom line is this: We have no reason to just sit back and take it. It isn't right that we must give up our dream of exercise physiology as a healthcare profession because others don't agree with us. Remember, not too long ago, men didn't believe women should vote. They were wrong! Change is always difficult; everyone seems to resist it and yet it is always ongoing. It would be tragic indeed if exercise physiologists who initially didn't agree with the founding of ASEP failed to take a hit in stride and bounced back.

Backbone is Important

My father used to say, "Never be a spineless person. Stand up for what you believe." He also believed that a college education should open the door to a career.

In the days before exercise physiology, a young high school student who was considering the importance of a college "degree," came upon a college student sitting on a bench reading a book. The high school student asked the college student, who didn't appear to be too engaged in his reading, "What are you doing?" The college student answered in a less than direct manner: "I'm trying to read this book, and it is the last thing I really want to do." The high school student continued his walk on the campus. Soon, he came upon another college student who looked to be reading a similar book, who looked neither uninterested nor challenged. "What are you doing?" the high school student asked. "I'm reading this book for a test tomorrow." The high school student went on his way. Before long he came upon a third college student, who was intensively into reading his book, who was taking notes, and who appeared happy with what he was doing. "What are you doing?" the high school student asked. The college student turned to face the high school student, smiled and said, "I'm studying to be a professional, to create a winning and convincing strategy for success, and to be the best leader I can be."*

There is a Difference!

The crux of the problem arises when students fail to see the difference between exercise science and exercise physiology. The illogical conclusion is: exercise science majors produce exercise physiologists. Academics seem to believe this, students believe this and, apparently, society believes this! As if this weren't enough, academics aren't teaching the differences. Aside from the usual jobs that benefit their career, taking risks aren't part of their agenda. Breaking deeply imbedded habits is hard, but not impossible. Yet, picture this: You are attending a conference. The speaker has just blasted the ASEP organization by saying that the leadership is a group of self-serving egos. He has announced his thinking before everyone. You turn to the person next to you and say: "That sounds like a very biased statement." That person turns directly to you and asks:

“What’s your point?” If you’re like most colleagues I know, you shouldn’t have to explain what is “confirmation bias.” Similarly, you shouldn’t have to explain the following quote in regards to sports medicine:

“To talk much and arrive nowhere is the same as climbing a tree to catch a fish.” – Chinese Proverb

Get Some Backbone

Being caught in a situation like the one just described, I find myself saying: “Get some backbone.” It is time to stop the sports medicine-dominated world of health, fitness, rehabilitation, and athletics. Let others know what you feel and think. Stop worrying that you might say the wrong thing. Your opinion matters just as importantly as the next person. If someone is saying something that minimizes the accomplishments of the ASEP organization when you know it isn’t true, speak up. Joe D. Batten said it best in his 1989 book, *Tough-Minded Leadership*. “Without integrity there is no credibility, and without credibility, no true communication can happen.”

Take responsibility for your beliefs and knowledge. Stating objections to a negative statement is not just only appropriate, it is imperative (especially when others disparage colleagues working on behalf of students). Rejecting information that is 100% wrong increases your credibility. Start sending the right message to colleagues that old patterns and behaviors along with the limitations and fears have nothing to do with today’s 21st century exercise physiology. In other words, heed the advice of Clementine Paddleford: “Never grow a wishbone, daughter, where your backbone ought to be.” [17, p.63]

Exercise Physiologist’s Credo

I do not choose to be a trainer, instructor, technician, or a common exercise practitioner. It is my right to be uncommon – my right to be a professional exercise physiologist. I seek professionalism and credibility – not the easy road. I do not wish to be certified by non-exercise physiology organizations that have nothing to do with the professional development of exercise physiology. I want to belong to the American Society of Exercise Physiologists. I want to be a member of the professional team of exercise physiologists as healthcare professionals. I understand the importance of a professional code of ethics, accreditation, board certification for exercise physiology prepared candidates, and standards of professional practice. I refuse to give away exercise physiology to non-exercise physiologists. I will not trade my education or dignity for a non-exercise physiology major. I will never cower before any other person or profession nor bend to any threat. It is my heritage and right to stand apart from non-exercise physiologists. I am proud of my membership with the American Society of Exercise Physiologists. I am proud to be a healthcare professional. I understand the importance of thinking and acting with integrity and credibility. All this is what it means to be an exercise physiologist.

Official Credo of the American Society of Exercise Physiologists

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*Adapted from: "Why Do We Work?" by Brian Dumaine (*Fortune*, December 26, 1994, p. 196), who tells of the difference between three stonemasons.