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**The Gift of Choice**

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AS EXERCISE PHYSIOLOGISTS, we helped develop sports medicine without realizing the extent to which we failed to develop our own professional base. For years, we thought sports medicine was exercise physiology! But, clearly, the two are not the same. Consider, for example, the following:

“The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) is an association of people and professions sharing the commitment to explore the use of medicine and exercise to make life healthier for all Americans. ACSM is an organization founded in 1954 and committed to the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of sports-related injuries and to the promotion of physical activity. ACSM's mission is to promote and integrate scientific research, education, and practical applications of sports medicine and exercise science to maintain and enhance physical performance, fitness, health, and quality of life.”

In short, ACSM is an association of people and associations committed to “use” of medicine and exercise. Or, stated somewhat differently (but the same meaning), an organization committed to the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of sports-related injuries. ACSM's mission is to promote and integrate research, education, and application of sports medicine and exercise science. In other words, ACSM is an organization committed to medicine, exercise, the treatment of injuries, and the promotion of a healthier lifestyle. ACSM is not an organization that promotes exercise physiologists. Instead, it is an association of people and professions, including cardiologists, orthopaedic surgeons, family practitioners, internal medicine, and other

medical specialties, physical educators, nurses, athletic trainers, physical therapists, exercise program directors, biomechanists, and exercise physiologists!

In contrast, “ASEP’s mission is 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. ASEP 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, ASEP empowers its members to serve the public good by making an academically sound difference in the application of exercise physiology concepts and insights.”

Note the differences between the two mission (vision) statements. One is committed to medicine and exercise and the prevention of injuries and a healthier lifestyle. The other is committed exclusively to the study and application of “exercise physiology” including the unification of all exercise physiologists. Unfortunately, for years, those of us who were involved with ACSM simply didn’t take the time to think about our association with and support of the organization. Obviously, ACSM is a professional organization of an association of diverse professionals. ASEP is exclusively a professional organization of exercise physiologists and, as such has laid the foundation for the emerging profession by asking, “What is exercise physiology?” and “What is our business?”

In seeking to recapture something of the heart of exercise physiology, members of the American Society of Exercise Physiologists propose that the good old days are over and the real beginning is now. The message is simple. It is about respect and a deeper understanding of the literal sense of the profession and the title, “Exercise Physiology” and “Exercise Physiologist”, respectively. It is about correcting the myth and appearance that the sports medicine model is looking out for exercise physiologists. However, correcting the myth may be hard to do among exercise physiologists who aren’t members of the Society. Their original concept of sports medicine and exercise science is still unbroken. But, of course, it is just a matter of time.

Much in the same way that some individuals thought they would use the typewriter forever and, yet they made the transition to the obvious. It is a new mind-set and, when it is completely understood, there really isn't any going back. After all, what ASEP is doing isn't really all that unique. Most other professionals under the generic title sports medicine have already done what ASEP is doing. They therefore have found themselves, and they have reconnected with their own vision and purpose for being. No longer is it necessary to feel that integration of diverse professional groups is the way to go. No longer do we have to subject ourselves to ideas, feelings, and concepts that speak only to sports medicine. The multi-glut organizational approach is over. Everything now is exclusively about the question, "What is in the best interest of the exercise physiologist?" The best place to address professional issues underlying exercise physiology is ASEP. It is "the" Society of professional exercise physiologists. It is not about entertaining all professional groups. It is not about empowering others to take jobs from our own graduates.

From now on, exercise physiologists are looking out for themselves. Hence, when asked if we should have our own professional organization, all we need to say is "Get real". Think about it. The syndrome of misdirection and confusion has run its course. Staying with it can only result in a continued rewriting of the same unsuccessful steps for our graduates. In fact, the latest sports medicine "certification" continues the same old complacency towards our bachelor prepared exercise physiologists. We literally must stop avoiding the fact that our undergraduates deserve respect. As their teachers, we energize them with hope of doing incredible things, and then we drop them like a hot potato. This practice and thinking has continued too long. The only winners in this "we first, you later" thinking are the sports medicine groups who look to make more money from yet another certification.

There is a better way. The key to knowing that way lies in understanding the ASEP vision. That's right! A vision is power! When others understand what we are working to accomplish, they too will feel the urge to work on behalf of all exercise physiologists.

They will understand that our concern comes from within. It is the key to realizing the ASEP vision but surprisingly too few of us understand the power we have to influence others. By power I mean the potential to provide things that other exercise physiologists want. We have the power to help ASEP. Simply by our position, our sincerity, and our desire to help others, we have the power to help. Our colleagues will listen to us. It all starts with you. Your character, your skills, and your capacity are influencing others in countless circumstances. So why not consider making a difference in the emerging profession and the development of ASEP? We are on the brink of a new and more improved interaction with the healthcare community and public sector. What you do today can help others from feeling powerless. The gift of choice is yours. You can decide to give up and/or keep things as they have been for decades or decide to take control of your work and your future.

We now have a choice. We can choose between sports medicine and exercise physiology, and we can also choose not to continue internalizing the criticisms and beliefs that others feel compelled to share with us. Forget their comments, especially when they say, "What are you doing? ASEP is a nothing organization. You can't be somebody by belonging to that organization?" People who wish to create doubt in your thinking aren't looking out for you. Their motivation is personal. They hope to keep you without hope and full of nonsense such as: "I don't think I can make it in ASEP." As Shakespeare said in *Measure of Measure*, "Our doubts are traitors and make us lose the good we oft might win by fearing to attempt."

Rather than doubting that you can make a difference in the professionalization of exercise physiology, escape from such feelings and believe in yourself. Believe that you can help create a different future (a better future) for all exercise physiologists. You have a choice! The gift is yours! The members of ASEP invite you to share in clarifying the ASEP vision, scope of our problems as well as the opportunities that lie ahead of us, and in the idea that YOU can make a big difference on behalf of thousands. What you can do, perhaps, someone else in ASEP can't do as well. The need for all of us working together is imperative, exciting, and powerful. For example, ASEP needs more

state associations. YOU can help by starting an organization in your state. The path to unity is not through coercive manipulation but out of a sincere desire to help. It begs the question, “What can we do together to create new opportunities for all of us?” Surely, asking such a question makes sense, and isn’t it a natural inclination for most of us to want to help?” This is the main reason ASEP was founded in 1997, that is, respect, trust, belief, and integrity. It is an organization of exercise physiologists for exercise physiologists who are true to what they believe is right.

Above all, however, it isn’t that the letters *ASEP* are important. Rather, it is the association of men and women with a common cause. Their relationships make ASEP and, if their influence on each other is honorable, then ASEP will grow as well as the dedication of each member to each other. That is what’s important; the members and then what the members make of their association that lives on and is passed from one generation to the next. The interconnectedness of the membership allows for and develops a lifelong, measurable impact on building up all exercise physiologists. All of us have the gift of choice! “Do I want to get involved, perhaps, the timing is wrong? In one more year I will be a “fellow” in “x” organization. What would they think if they knew my true feelings?” Obviously, not everyone is ready to fight the fight and, it is reasonable that we should be patient with our colleagues. It is a rare point in time that every one should agree on the same thought, idea, or way of doing something. Because of our differences, commitments, and relationships it is no surprise that we often exhaust our emotions trying to hang on before the transition is complete. So, please understand that however important it is to “do something” and “to get involved” and “to share the message” – we must not be unprofessional towards our colleagues who need more time. We also need to be in the position to learn from others.

The gift of choice comes with a price. First, there is the personal decision to choose which side of the tracks to stand. Second, after the choice is made and action is evident, we should always wish the best to our colleagues who disagree by their presence on the other side of the tracks. This doesn’t mean that we can’t have strong disagreements, but do so in a respectful and dignified manner. We must understand

that it is important not to allow even a vision of great importance to get in the way of friendship. All human beings measure up and are worthy of our praise and, thus it is important to withhold judgments that may cause emotional harm and helplessness. Kindness is important and encouraged. Hence, ironic as it may seem, ASEP members should always be supportive and non-judgmental and, where possible, speak kindly of sports medicine professionals.

Needless to say, “speaking kindly” doesn’t mean that we can’t agree to disagree and even do so with some emotion. It isn’t possible to be authentic without living a fight congruent with our own emotions and desires. We can nonetheless, as a unified body, be without malice as well as act and believe, according to the founder of McDonald’s, Ray Kroc, that “All of us is better than any of us.” All of us need to read and re-read the ASEP vision and keep our eyes on it day in and day out. Too often organizations create a vision only to be forgotten. We can’t allow that to happen or otherwise what drives us will disappear, where we are going we will be forgotten, and our commitment will be without reward. We need to keep our eyes on the ASEP vision, why ASEP is important, and why the members have come together.

Keeping our eyes open and on task gets us up in the morning. It drives us to try one more thing because everything is not fine in exercise physiology. There are problems, particularly in cardiopulmonary rehabilitation where our graduates’ education is misunderstood or simply overlooked. Job opportunities are not what they should be, and this alone is important enough to move us to act on our dreams. It doesn’t take much thinking to understand what is wrong with the sports medicine model, what is right with the ASEP vision, and what resources are available to all exercise physiologists through mutual investment in our collective efforts. The ASEP vision is our purpose for what we do. It sets the stage for our willingness to take risks not just for ourselves, but for someone we don’t even know so that down the road that person and others like him or her can have a better life.

ASEP members have come together to speak on behalf of exercise physiologists at all levels. Their credibility is sound. They can be believed. They are engaged in the actions considered important to professionalism. There is hope in a better future in exercise physiology. There are leaders within ASEP who haven't surfaced yet. They will, and they will help others translate dreams into reality. They understand that "We cannot become what we need to be by remaining what we are" (Max DePree). A sobering thought. Hence, if we wish to change exercise science to exercise physiology, a discipline to a profession, and letting go of "what is" for "what can be," leaders from within ASEP must have the courage to move others to "let go" so that we can change and bring together a reshaping of what we are and what we do. New leaders from within ASEP will help us to live true to our vision and, so it is that YOU have the gift of choice; a gift that can and will make a difference.

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### Suggested Readings

Covey, S. R. (1989). *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

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