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**To Change or Not**

Tommy Boone, PhD, MPH, MAM, MBA

Board Certified Exercise Physiologist

The truth will set you free, but first it will make you angry!

-- John C. Maxwell

I

have been writing about the need for change in exercise physiology for more than 20 years. Apparently, the content of my writing does not fit into the "likable" category for most exercise physiologists. For certain, I have not figured out what lies at the heart of changing the thinking of exercise physiologists. In fact, I have no idea as to what it will take to get exercise physiologists to start thinking of exercise physiology as *the* 21st century healthcare profession (1).

Why exercise physiologists are so slow to embrace the opportunity to become leaders in exercise medicine is hard for me to understand (2). Exercise physiology is not just about doing research, regardless of the academic institutions’ point of view. Also, it is not just about the college professors’ desire to win big with a promotion and/or tenure. Exercise physiology is a healthcare profession that is responsible for creating and sustaining itself. This means having the courage to be different is necessary to embrace the ASEP vision.

It means the willingness to consider new ideas and new thinking that will influence exercise physiologists in understanding what they are doing or failing to do and why it is inevitable they need their own professional organization. Also, it is critical that we get moving in the direction of unique exercise physiology services. At the very least, this means a gut-level commitment on behalf of as many exercise physiologists as possible to produce well-managed wins for our profession.

After all, it is clear that the blind following of the common practices of most exercise physiologists has led us down a path of submission to other professions. I think it is a destination we do not want to go. To avoid doing so, we must have the courage to be different. We must understand that being different is a path that the majority of the academic exercise physiologists will try put down.

But, it is important and imperative that we acknowledge the little freedom we presently have will not exist if we continue to accept the status quo of the present-day academic thinking. Forget authenticity, truth, and the confidence of knowing "who we are" and "what we do". If we become totally submissive to, for example, academia and/or physical therapy, we will no longer exist as exercise physiologists with the expectation to practice exercise medicine.

We must accept that we are on a journey that is special (3). Thus, we must embrace our relationship with healthcare. After all, we are the healthcare professionals with the expertise to prescribe exercise medicine to prevent and/or help correct the challenges of living with chronic diseases. But, we cannot be what we need to be if we fail to change and evolve consciously as healthcare professionals.

Hence, we need to get with the program. In other words, it is time to connect with our professional needs, our students, and society’s healthcare concerns. Our students, in particular, need a market-driven job after they graduate from college. Without a career after college, the students are out of college without a job. This is a terrible outcome, especially since the students and their parents believe that the purpose of going to college is to locate a great job after college (4).

Unfortunately, the truth is that the real purpose students are in college is to finance the business of academia, although the students are not aware of it. If only the academic administrators could change their thinking about why and how colleges exist, everybody would be much better for it, especially the students. But, this point begs the question: Are the administrators and the faculty listening?

Obviously, it is easier to avoid change. In fact, it seems that it is the obsession of those in control, that is, to turn a deaf ear to students' problems. This is especially true given that the essence of "what is" has not changed in decades. In particular, the academic exercise physiologists see themselves as researchers. Many are not interested in teaching or thinking outside the box. They have not taken the time to examine their failures at teaching or that of their colleagues. Look around you, and you will get the feeling that no one is interested in updating the exercise physiology curriculum. After all, change is not just hard for many, it is next to impossible.

Why this is the case is a combination of many factors. The most obvious problem is that no one really wants to take on the work of changing. It is simply too comfortable to just do nothing. It is easier to just close your eyes, ears, and mind to the reality of the students’ pain. Otherwise to change is to be challenged to think differently. That means taking on the responsibility and personal accountability of doing what is necessary to promote the profession of exercise physiology (5).

Clearly, as witnessed by studying the work of other professions, taking on full ownership of exercise physiology is the path to student success and fulfillment. We must become what we are, that is, exercise physiology healthcare professionals. We must adapt to the work that is required of "professionals". Yes, we can still do research and we must continue to do research, but it can’t be the only thing we do. Abuse of this point has driven us away from our primary purpose as college "teachers" and "healthcare professionals".

We must let go of what is comfortable and embrace the uncomfortable, regardless of the work that must be done. While each of us has experienced something in life that was hard to do or deal with, generally speaking we did it anyway. Feeling uncomfortable is never a good feeling, but it is the door that must be opened to witness change. It is the same feeling for most athletes who wanted to say "no" to the learning of a new sports skill because they were uncomfortable about giving it a try. The answer is always "do it anyway" and, then learn from your mistakes.

But, here again, the question is this: Are exercise physiologists stuck in the rut of exercise science? How about kinesiology or sports medicine? If so, why is it so difficult to sit down and figure out what to do differently? The exercise physiologists' past and present are not so unique from either has stopped other fields or disciplines of study from changing. After all, the ASEP (American Society of Exercise Physiologists) leadership has provided the path to a new way of thinking about exercise physiology. It is time to change.

At some point, exercise physiologists at all levels of education have to realize that the lack of change is the result of their personal decision to look the other way. Strange as it sounds, their reluctance to change is due to the fact they do not want to change or it will create issues for them. Why? The short answer is because the exercise science and sports medicine rut has become their way of doing things. It is their identity. The idea of becoming a member of the ASEP organization and promoting the professionalization of exercise physiology is the right path for all exercise physiologists and their students.

Those who come across as not interested in ASEP will continue to look for generic organizations to come up with a quick fix. The problem of course is that the thinking is unsound and simply more of the same old stuff. The easy way out is not the answer, especially since it is driven by the quick fix mentality. Deep down they understand this, but are scare to try something different for fear of what others may say. This is especially true for those individuals who need the comfort and safety of thinking that is embraced by a number of individuals (even if such thinking is wrong).

The ASEP leaders understand that the academic exercise physiologists' comfortable research job is fun and it is rewarding. They get it. But, what the academics want to avoid if not forget is wrong. Whether they like it or not they are responsible for providing the 21st century exercise physiology curriculum that benefits the students and their parents. Hence, the emphasis on research must be shared with the importance of teaching, which is the reason they were hired in the first place or it at least it should have been.

Given this context, strangely enough the choice to put all of one's energy in doing research may seem better, but the decision to do so degrades the educational system. Why exercise physiologists as college teachers allow the administrative emphasis on research versus teaching define who they are and what they are is a function of the need to hang on to what is familiar and comfortable. But, of course what is missing is their freedom to change and their willingness to go beyond the familiar as well as their failure to understand the need for change.

What they must come to terms with is the students' problems that result from the faculty's unwillingness to change. This means demonstrating the willingness to overcome their fear of the unknown as well as the perceived risks from colleagues as they step in the ASEP's direction rather than what they understand as common for the past decades. Understandably, it is never easy to move in a direction different from current thinking. Resistance is just that and it does not matter if you have a PhD. Hence, when colleagues cannot think for themselves for fear of being fired, the system and its so-called leadership have failed them.

If the failed leadership is not going to be held accountable for its behavior, then it is up to each person to do what is right. Since change is about leading and facing the resistance, it becomes clear that change is about gaining control over him- or herself and ownership over exercise physiology. This is true regardless of the unknowns, although leaders help to clarify the certainty of the direction, the why, and the how.

Why is this thinking necessary? It is the logical and required step to changing exercise physiology from the so-called sub-discipline of kinesiology or some other old way of thinking about exercise physiology to acknowledge exercise physiology as a profession of healthcare practitioners. There is honor and dignity in supporting change that is logical and required. Yes, it is a big shift in strategic thinking. The ASEP leaders understand this point. But, exercise physiologists cannot celebrate who they are unless they let go of their past thinking so they can move on.

Moving on (i.e., taking the next step to create yourself) is the essence of being different from yesterday’s thinking. It means clarifying the exercise physiologists’ role as the healthcare professionals with the academic training, certification, and professional practice to safely develop an exercise medicine prescription. This thinking is a major departure from exercise physiology viewed as just the study of acute and chronic adaptations to exercise to that of applying exercise physiology knowledge and laboratory skills to help individuals of all ages and gender to avoid the negative effects of chronic diseases and disabilities (6).

There is nothing wrong or inappropriate about the ASEP's thinking, especially given its professional infrastructure that includes academic accreditation of exercise physiology degree programs, board certification, code of ethics, and standards of professional practice (3). ASEP is the change that all exercise physiologists need and have needed for decades. The work has been done by the ASEP leaders and members. Thus, it is inevitable that those who have invested their time and money (if not their career) will be supported and honored.

For now, it is safe to say that the effects of ASEP are reaching into the academic community at a slow pace. But, the effects are being felt in many ways. It is happening. Hence, to change is in reality a change for the better because we must change to find ourselves. Increasingly, more faculty members and their students will benefit from the ASEP influence on exercise physiology. Less interference and disruption will be experienced by involved parties. ASEP, as the professional organization of exercise physiologists, will continue to work on improving the ongoing change and the acceptance of ASEP Board Certified Exercise Physiologists as healthcare professionals (7).

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