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**Changing the Thinking of Exercise Physiologists**

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**hange** is the single most important thing exercise physiologists need to do. This thought is very simple, but obviously very complicated. With change a whole new life is possible for the students of exercise physiology. Without change, there is very little to no hope of transforming exercise physiology from a research discipline to a healthcare profession. This is especially so in academia where restructuring and new strategies are not common.

The most turbulence the college teachers experience centers on department meetings, faculty politics, and writing end of the year reports. The faculty understand what they must do to survive in the present-day system and, frankly, it is as simple as publishing research papers. Publishing is a big deal. Publish more than your colleagues will separate you from the less published and less popular. The entire process is not very complicated.

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| **Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow. The important thing is to not stop questioning.** – Albert Einstein |

What is complicated is rejecting status quo. No one is willing to win big by being different and by “questioning” the standard practice. It is a scary place to be. Thus, the core problem with thinking differently is the reality of creating uncomfortable thoughts but inevitably new thinking among one’s colleagues. That is the point of this article. ***Change is almost non-existent among those who work in academia, which is a copycat place of employment.*** There are no visions or new thinking of something different or better.

Whether at the top of the research chain or at the bottom of teaching class after class, the challenge day after day is to support the culture of research. That’s it. No one has a sense of urgency. So, why write about changing behavior? The short answer is to do one’s best to influence the thoughts and feelings of just one person who may in time do the same for another person. The flow of change is slow but important because it is essential to survival.

Given that change is the reason why the American Society of Exercise Physiologists was founded in 1997, perhaps now it is easier to understand why ASEP is a small organization. Yes, there are members with the credibility and skills to provide leadership. But, for now, it is fitting to say that the academic exercise physiologists do not have a sense of urgency to change. Unfortunately, they get frustrated and bogged down with work and so they revert to everything that brings them a sense of success. The nurturing of a new idea isn’t easy and, therefore, many who were originally interested in possibilities become cynics and skeptics. This is true for almost all new organizations despite the vision and strategy to change.

If you are an exercise physiologist, which means that you either have a degree in exercise physiology or you sat for the ASEP “Exercise Physiologist Certified” exam and passed it, are you uncomfortable with the dozens of degree titles that college graduates earn and yet often refer to themselves as an exercise physiologist? Do you think it is acceptable for a kinesiology major to call him- or herself an exercise physiologist? Well, just recently my wife received a card in the mail from a college graduate with a degree in kinesiology who said he was an exercise physiologist. At the gut-level, it’s not just a matter that he is lying to the public that bothers me as it is a deeper unattended to academic problem by the lazy if not incompetent faculty throughout the United States.

Under no circumstances should such behavior be allowed and, yet it is in fact being encouraged by college teachers in exercise science, kinesiology, human performance, and dozens of off-shoots from the physical education degree. It’s an image that is hard to shake, especially when you have the same message many times by a PhD exercise physiologist who is speaking to a spring semester senior: “John, you need to complete the PT application this week or if you feel better about OT, then complete the OT application for graduate school. Otherwise, you are going to graduate and find yourself living at home or working as a waiter.”

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| **Change your thoughts and you change the world.** – Norman Vincent Peale |

My point is that if a college degree is not a career-specific degree, then it should be removed from the academic list of degrees throughout the institutions. Yes, I understand that such a comment is rather dramatic. Think about it. What is so compelling about offering an academic degree that is not career-focused? Is it to provide a few teachers a job while leaving 100s of students without a job after college? Is it to make money from the students who fail to think twice about the major? Whatever it is, in light of the problems it creates, it must be changed.

As a college teacher for 44 years, I believe that I have the right to make this mind-boggling point. And, however, strange it might sound, I believe it is imperative that exercise physiologists at all levels (from the BS to the PhD) must talk about the necessity to change if they are going to let go of yesterday’s way of doing things.

Doing things as we have always done them is not going to improve exercise physiology and yet, have you ever witnessed so much complacency? Driven by “this is the way we have always done it” mentality along with self-protection and arrogance has left some ASEP members challenged and sad when sharing the ASEP vision. They have experienced their colleagues acting defensively when asking them to understand and/or evaluate the negative effects of status quo.

Think about this: for ~20 years (i.e., since I started the ***Professionalization of Exercise Physiology online***, electronic journal as part of ASEP organization) less than a dozen academic exercise physiologists have published an article about professionalism in exercise physiology. Why, because the topic is obviously not important among the exercise physiology college teachers. One reason this is the case is because it is inherently risky to think different when seeing, feeling, and living the truth. A reality other than what is common may become an unwanted mid-life career crisis.

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| **Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.** – Barack Obama |

Meanwhile, the world of healthcare is constantly changing and growing. If you were to read the professionalism articles written by physical therapists, you would see that the change is always an ongoing process. They and other healthcare professionals understand that if change isn’t taking place, then they are liable for their lack of responsibility to their profession, clients, patients, and society. They understand that professionalism is key to growth and stability. As a result, they are constantly doing what it takes to embrace large-scale thinking that supports new thinking.

Yes, they are realistic but opportunistic in their thinking, such as exercise medicine! “Watch out for the exercise physiologists” is an obvious statement of concern. That’s why physical therapists are hopeful that academic exercise physiologists continue with their outdated behavior. On the other hand, if exercise physiologists are the healthcare professionals to prescribe exercise medicine, then they must jump immediately to create the professional vision and strategy to build the essential thinking among exercise physiologists to help society understand who they are and what they do.

The details of doing so have been addressed in article after article published in ***PEPonline***, ***JPEP***, and the ***Journal of Exercise Medicine online*** (***JEMonline***). The bottom line is obvious or at least it should be to any high school student. The present-day fragmented discipline of exercise physiologists cannot become a profession of exercise physiologists without changing. This is an important point, and one the academic exercise physiologists fail to grasp if they are going to chart the future of the 21st century exercise physiologists.

The truth is this: when professionalism finally becomes a topic of discussion, the consequences of changing from status quo thinking to reaching for the stars where other healthcare professionals exist will be excellent for exercise physiology. Take a moment to visualize a future that gives the students of exercise physiology the feelings of happiness and success. Is it surprising that is what ASEP wants to do, too? Yes, to many of our friends and colleagues, it is a complicated reality that is worth the time, effort, and pain associated with change. In time, I believe it will be understood. After all, the ASEP vision is worth the effort, and the academic exercise physiologists will learn to think as healthcare professionals and not just as researchers. They will also learn to speak the truth, regardless of the feelings otherwise (1).

It is just a matter of time. Bold beliefs require time to deal with the emotions of being threatened. The new exercise physiology will succeed. But, having said that, it is important to get on with the required changes. So, let us come together sooner rather than later and overcome our individual and collective inertia so that we can be everything we need to be. Remember, the goal is to get as many exercise physiologists involved in making the ASEP vision a reality. Will there continue to be resistance? Yes, but the source of heat and dissatisfaction can be unclogged one at a time as we learn how to walk the talk to create a great future for all exercise physiologists.

As John P. Kotter and Dan S. Cohen (2) said, “Never underestimate the power of clever people to help others see the possibilities, to help them generate a feeling of faith, and to change behavior.” Stated somewhat differently, we must never underestimate the feeling of hope, courage, and prayer. There is a solution to our slowness, and surprisingly it lies within us. Keep the feeling alive so that we can change and we will become what we were meant to be.

**References**

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