

Retention, Retention, Retention Keeping Our Colleagues in the Trenches

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Over a period of years (thirty or more, probably), a number of coaches have left forensics. Some have retired from education. Some have retired from coaching. Some have left coaching to pursue other academic interests. Some of those individuals have returned to positions that are solely teaching positions. Others have moved into administrative positions, at a departmental level, or at a college or university level. Invariably, those individuals have left “holes” to be filled. Filling the positions is not necessarily a concern or a problem.

Positions can and have been filled by competent coaches and educators. The “natural” attrition provides new/young coaches some opportunities to take their place in the profession. We understand that new coaches will develop and establish new/different ways of doing things, and that can be a healthy experience. We welcome the new coaches and wish them well in their new positions.

Some positions, unfortunately, are not filled, for a variety of reasons. Some departments may wish to be rid of a forensics program that is seen as a drain on department resources. We have learned from experience that leaving those positions unfilled frequently means that a forensics program will be terminated, or allowed to disappear. Whether the department chooses to not fill the position, or whether there are not suitable applicants for the position, the result tends to be the same. The program will be allowed to disappear.

Coaches who are leaving a coaching position may know that the position likely will not be filled. Some certainly know that, others may speculate, still others may believe that the position will be filled. In any case, those coaches leave the coaching position, regardless of the outcome for the forensics program. Up to that point, those coaches have been perceived as dedicated, enthusiastic, concerned for the health of the forensics program and the educational opportunities for their students. The question, then, is why do those coaches leave the activity? Knowing that there is a very real possibility that the position will not be filled and that the program may be terminated, why do those coaches turn their backs and walk away from students and programs to which they have been so dedicated?

The short answer is that many are feeling burned out. They feel that their reservoir has been depleted, and that they have no more to give. They

have had little or no opportunity to get rejuvenated. Unfortunately, they may be the only coach, and juggling a teaching load, rehearsing, traveling, and handling all the administrative responsibilities takes a toll on their energy and their spirit. While some may have the luxury of having a graduate assistant, many do not. They have no one with whom they can share those responsibilities, and no one to help lighten their load. With luck, there might be a part-time person who is hired to assist with coaching, but too frequently that individual does little or no traveling with the team. Burn-out sets in pretty quickly when the coach feels there is no relief in sight, and eventually he or she may begin to feel that no one cares about the stress of carrying the program alone. He or she feels they have no one with whom they can confidentially talk about the problem student who seems to be a disruption on the team, or vent about comments written on ballots, or the student who refuses to follow suggestions in coaching sessions. They have no one with whom they can safely and comfortably test ideas for a new case, or to feel supportively challenged about a plan for managing the team. These feelings of being alone are complicated if the coach is also trying to develop or maintain a personal relationship or support a family. In short, burn-out sets in when the coach feels alone in the coaching position, without a support system to help him/her survive.

They are tired, and tired of feeling overwhelmed, over-worked and underpaid. The days are long and the nights are short. The weeks are long and the weekends are longer. Teaching and coaching for 5 days (and 4 nights) during the week is tiring. Then the coach puts the team in a van, gets behind the wheel, and drives several hours to a tournament. Saturday and Sunday are spent being on duty for 24-hour days, judging and coaching. Then the tired coach puts the tired team in the van and drives several hours to get back home. On Monday morning, the cycle begins again. Somewhere along the way, the coach needs to prepare for classes, grade papers, write exams, perhaps serve on departmental or university committees, and conduct some academic research and participate in professional activities so that he/she can be considered for tenure or a promotion. On top of these responsibilities, he/she may need to work on a doctorate, in his/her spare time. This coach soon becomes physically and mentally

exhausted. The quickest option/solution is to stop coaching.

Many experienced coaches are familiar with the strain described here. While those who have been coaching for a few years may have learned to adjust or to accept these factors, many new coaches struggle with the pressure of the new situation. Graduate students may be given numerous opportunities to experience life as a coach. However, their travel schedule may be modified or monitored so that they are not traveling weekend after weekend. Their coaching responsibilities may be adjusted in order to allow them sufficient time to complete work for their classes. While they may have opportunities to share some of the responsibilities for managing a team or directing a program, the major portion of the responsibilities are assumed by the Director under whom they are working and studying. They rarely are faced with the complexities of handling the daily work load of the full-time coach and faculty member.

Initially, we may feel that we are protecting the graduate student who is the coach in-training. The assumption seems to be that it is too soon or too early in the training process to expose the prospective coach to all the duties of being a Director of Forensics, or a full time coach. After all, we don't want to scare them away or deter them from completing their program. The activity needs these enthusiastic, energetic young professionals to fill positions that are empty and waiting. This seems like a good way to keep programs alive and active.

These new coaches, however, may be the very ones who are at risk of needing to be retained. Once they begin their new position, it won't take long for them to realize how much they have missed in their training, and how unprepared they feel for their new professional role. When we train them, they likely are part of a team, composed of 2 or more graduate assistants. They may have several graduate-student coaching colleagues with whom they can share responsibilities and headaches, with whom they can brainstorm and commiserate. We seem to expect them to learn by observing that sometimes a coach is handling all the responsibilities alone, except that no one around them is operating alone. We forget to tell them that they may feel somewhat deserted when they get out into their own position. We neglect to point out that their local support system may not be in place down the hall, or in the office next door. If they are lucky, they might start their career as an assistant, working with a Director who will continue to guide them through the process of learning new policies and procedures on the new campus.

New coaches, whether they are beginning their first position, fresh from graduate school, or whether they are new to a school or position, or new to an area, need mentoring. The mentoring needs to be of two types. The first type of mentoring is practical

guidance to help the new coach understand the processes and procedures of managing a program in a new setting. There likely will be a myriad of questions about how the local system works, or who to contact to reserve vehicles, or how to put together a budget request. Some of these questions can be answered by other members of the coach's department, but some may be answered better by someone with whom the new coach is more comfortable.

In addition to practical mentoring, the new coach will need some more personal mentoring. This type of mentoring may be more critical in helping to retain the new coaches, and sometimes is harder to accomplish. New coaches who are struggling with trying to function in a new environment need someone to listen. The mentor might need to provide some answers or give some suggestions, but a majority of the time might be spent listening. The new coach needs have someone with whom they can vent their frustrations and not be concerned that a new colleague will think less of them because they seem to be unsure of what they are doing. The new coach needs to know that there is someone available who will listen, who will be sympathetic and non-judgmental, who understands, and who cares.

Volumes have been written about the need for and the value of mentoring. Frequently presented from the perspective of the business world, nearly all of the sources indicate that mentoring takes time, effort, and dedication. Experienced coaches who are Directors of Forensics already have busy schedules and heavy demands on their time. It may seem unfair or unreasonable to ask them to take on one more task. But taking the time to make a call or send a message could help retain a new coach, and potentially save a program. The mentor may not need to do anything more than just listen to a frustrated colleague vent about the events that seem almost intolerable at that time.

There are two key factors to be met for a mentoring relationship to work. The first is that mentors need to be identified and be willingly available to the new coaches. If mentors are unwilling or unavailable, the process won't work. The mentor doesn't need to be available at any hour of the day or night, but it is reasonable to expect that the mentor would be available to at least schedule a specific conference time. New coaches need to be provided with information about who they can contact. The second factor is that the relationship between the mentor and the new coach will need be comfortable, so that the new coach can confidently and safely express concerns without fear of ridicule or reprimand. It can be very difficult for a new coach to reveal a lack of knowledge or understanding, and it is important that the new coach know that those revelations will be confidential.

Twenty-five or thirty years ago, Dr. Gary Horn talked about the role of a director of forensics. He observed that “A director of forensics must be all things to all people.” While he may not have specified exactly what that list included, he did identify many of the roles that we all recognize. In the intervening thirty years, that list has undoubtedly grown and one role to be added is that of a mentor. While we expect that current, experienced coaches will mentor their former students and graduate students, we should also expect that all experienced coaches will take on a mentoring role and share their knowledge and expertise with any new coach. An active mentoring program can help to retain many at-risk new coaches.