

Shoot For Success

Six Key Strategies For Applying Team Spirit in the Workplace

By Mariah Burton Nelson



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I started working as an executive director two years ago, at age fifty. It was my first association job, not counting a stint as interim director of AARP's speechwriting team. My background is unique, but many executive directors of small associations are similarly new to this role. Regardless of your background, I recommend bringing your pre-association perspective into your current job.

My background is sports. I played basketball at Stanford University, in a European professional league, and in the first women's pro league in the United States. I'm still a swimmer and golfer. My colleagues tease me about showing up early on Staff Picnic days to practice my badminton serve. I never feel more alive, focused, and happy than when I'm playing a sport.

After my basketball career ended, I was self-employed as an author, journalist, and professional speaker for about 20 years. I wrote about my athletic experiences, interviewed other athletes and coaches, and shared analysis and advice. My motto: *Think of yourself as an athlete.*

So while I bring business, communication, and subject-matter expertise to my job at the American Association for Physical Activity and Recreation (we promote lifelong and inclusive physical activity and recreation), it's my athletic confidence, work ethic, and team spirit that most shape my leadership decisions and cultivate our team-oriented workplace culture.

Here are six keys to our success:

1. Have fun. I deliberately spend about 15 minutes most mornings laughing and chatting with my staff, deepening our relationships. Hard work also unites us, but winning is not my only goal: I want to provide an environment of trust, growth, and mutual appreciation. While we stand around, we juggle, play catch, and shoot hoops with assorted Nerf balls, Koosh balls, and Hacky Sacks. Playing together contributes to employee satisfaction and also translates to better ideas, since brainstorming is more successful when people are physically engaged.

2. Love your teammates. Okay, "love" is too loaded for the workplace. "Unconditional positive regard" (psychologist Carl Rogers' term) might be more acceptable. But I do adore my staff members, and they know it. They respond with increased confidence and commitment. Jim Thompson, founder of the Positive Coaching Alliance, recommends a 5:1 ratio of praise to criticism. I'd estimate that my own ratio is closer to 20:1. I'm a team captain, encouraging through authentic appreciation, while also playing the game myself. Similarly, my board's feedback to me is heavily weighted on the praise side of the equation. I thrive under those conditions. Who wouldn't?



My fundamentals are revenue-generating activities and member services.

3. Ask for help. In basketball, you yell “help” when you get beat on defense. Such humility is useful in association management, especially when you’re new. I turn to my colleagues, to my board, and to my staff not only for assistance but for advice. All of my staff members, from administrative assistant to senior program manager, offer solutions I didn’t think of myself.

4. Improvise. The inherent drama of athletic contests is that you’re not sure what will happen. In sports, this is a good thing. I embrace it in association management as well. I experiment, expecting some success and some failure.

5. Focus on fundamentals. Basketball players practice core competencies (dribbling, shooting, rebounding, passing, and defense) every day. In association management, one must similarly commit to continual improvement. Surely you’ve noticed how easy it can be to get sidetracked by tangential demands. My two daily mantras are *revenue-generating activities* and *member services*. For us, those are the fundamentals upon which success is built.

6. Aim high. I find realistic goal setting rather dull. The “Can we break a new record?” goals are the ones that excite me. In September, we were awarded \$324,000 from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to teach bicycle safety in schools and communities. This represents more than half of our annual budget. Later that month, we won another federal grant—\$12 million—to expand Head Start to include physical-activity training and facilities nationwide. The new Head Start Body Start Center for Physical Development and Outdoor Play will be a joint project with our sister association, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education. How’s that for teamwork?

Don’t get me wrong, no one’s perfect. I could write a very long Wikipedia entry about my mistakes, and many people would be eager to edit it. But as with a basketball game, you never know exactly how a project, fiscal year, or career will end. That’s why I think it’s important to high-five colleagues, members, partners, and staff every chance we get, sharing our enthusiasm about each basket we score along the way.

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About AAPAR & AAHPERD

The American Association for Physical Activity and Recreation (AAPAR) serves more than 8,000 professors, teachers, trainers, and community leaders who promote meaningful physical activity and recreation across the lifespan. AAPAR is one of five national associations that make up the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD), which was founded in 1885 and is the largest organization of professionals committed to achieving a healthy lifestyle. For more information, visit www.aapar.org.