

Athletics, School Climate, and Promoting a Psychology of Success

By John Shindler

Those of us who work in and around school athletics know intuitively that what we do makes a big difference to the school as a whole, and effects the broader school climate. As a former athlete, coach and now school researcher/consultant, I will tell you that your instincts are supported by growing research. What and how we do our jobs as coaches, athletic directors, trainers and athletes will have a profound effect on the entire school.

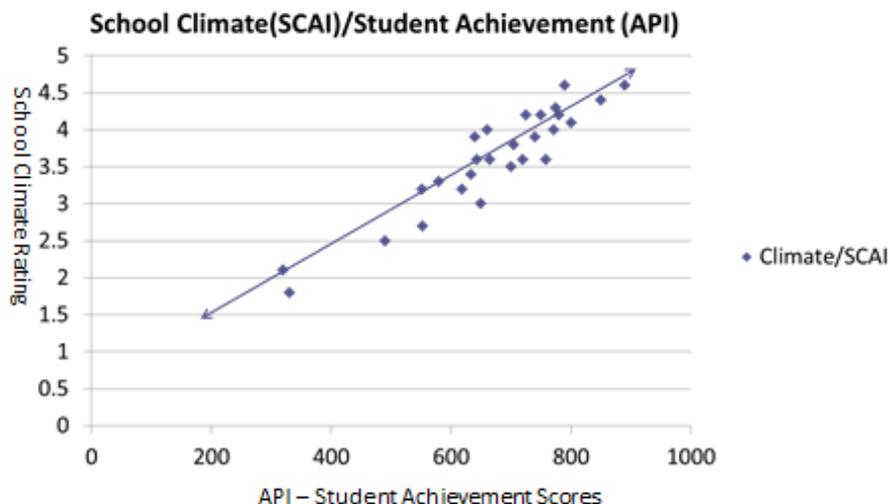
To start with, what we have found (again this will not surprise you) is that everything is connected in any school. Every area tends to be either generally not very good, generally ok, or generally really good. The X factor in the equation is climate and culture, and it is defined by what we do, the attitude with which we do it, and how we think about who we are individually and collectively.

One mistake a lot of educators make is to look externally at their situation and to blame the students, or parents, or neighborhood for the quality of the school. Our research says the situation is not as determinant as we think. We often do the same thing with teams too. But the truth is that great leaders/educators look internally for their answers.

Why did Bruce Brown have high achieving, high character, high “love of the game” teams EVERYWHERE he went? What he did was create a “psychology of success” quickly and powerfully in each location.

So let’s take that X factor, which we will call climate and correlate it to something else like achievement. What you will see in this actual scatter plot diagram from the research at 30 some schools, is that there is almost a perfect correlation. In other words, when we do brand A practice we get low achievement, when we do brand B practice we get OK achievement and when we do brand C practice we get high achievement. Always you ask? So far we have not seen an outlier in more than 300 schools.

School Climate Score (SCAI) by Student Achievement (CA API)



We could substitute a lot of other thing in this diagram for the achievement variable such as wins, enjoyment, learning, character development, life skills, likelihood of engaging in the sport in the future, etc. Academic success and athletic success come from the same X factor.

In our school climate assessment instrument, we have one item in particular that shows this correlation. In low functioning schools most participants report that the athletes walk around entitled and use their position to treat others poorly. In middle functioning schools, athletes act pretty well for the most part, but there is an assumption that jocks are what they are and need to be tolerated. In high functioning schools the athletes use their gifts and position to be leader servants. In the hundreds of studies we have assessed, it has always been a solid predictor of the climate.

Ok, so what is it that makes great schools, teams, companies, classrooms, or collectives of any kind. Mostly it is related to a quality that we could term “psychology of success” (POS) or “psychology of failure (POF). I occasionally run across great leaders, teachers and coaches creating high levels of POS. But mostly I see educators with really good intentions that are creating a little POS and a little POF with the net effect of mediocrity.

What is a psychology of success (POS)? It is defined by three inter-related factors. These factors are 1) internal vs. external locus of control (LOC), 2) a sense of acceptance and belonging vs. alienation and worthlessness, and 3) a growth vs. fixed ability orientation.

The concepts of self-esteem, achievement psychology, intrinsic motivation, basic needs satisfaction, are fundamental related to construct of a Psychology of Success (POS). Paring the research in this area down to its fundamental components, these three essential factors emerge to explain the degree to which an individual student/athlete or a collective group/team has a psychological orientation toward success or failure.

Growth vs. Fixed-Ability Orientation. Carol Dweck in her research over the course of 30 years has developed a very useful paradigm with which to examine academic self-concept, achievement, and motivation. She has demonstrated that future success is not as much the result of talent (i.e., fixed ability factors) or current level of ability, as it is the result of the orientation/cognitive strategy one uses to approach learning tasks (i.e., a growth mindset). Dweck offers a useful lens for distinguishing two contrasting cognitive strategies for feeling competent and how over time they have dramatically different results. When a student/athletes uses a growth orientation they view a situation as an opportunity to learn and grow. They do not see their performance within a situation as a measure of their innate ability as much as a measure of their investment – better results requires more practice. Students/athletes who approached tasks with a fixed ability orientation viewed the context as a reflection of how much ability they innately possessed in that area. The result is a student/athlete who is looking for situations that will not challenge their fragile self-image or make them feel “dumb” or untalented. Dweck found that students/athletes with a growth pattern were more likely to persist in the face of failure and experience higher levels of achievement.

Some things we can do to promote either a growth orientation (what we want to encourage) or a fixed ability orientation (what we want to minimize).

Practices that promote a Growth-Orientation	Practices that promote a Fixed-Ability Orientation
John Wooden/Bruce Brown – focus on the process and outcomes will take care of themselves	Promote the mentality that we all need to do whatever it takes to win.
Give effort and technique related feedback	Give ability related feedback
Create goals related to skill development, execution, and contribution to the team effort.	Create outcome and win-loss related goals.
All experience is used to get better. Learn from mistakes and encourage intelligent risk taking.	Focus on mistakes as bad. Keep athletes afraid of failure and making mistakes.

Acceptance and Belonging vs. Alienation and Worthlessness. This second factor within the framework for a POS reflects the degree to which any member feels connected, wanted and part of the group and the degree to which one likes and accepts one’s self. The more one feels connected, accepted and acceptable, the more one will be able to express one’s self, act authentically and be fully present to others (Osterman, 2000).

Some things we can do to promote Acceptance and Belonging on our teams

Promoting Acceptance and Belonging	Undermining Acceptance and Belonging
Keep the focus on team – a single collective	Emphasize the relative contribution of each player
Focus on contribution and the gift a player brings to the collective.	Focus on ability and stats
Hold all players accountable for team standards and being supportive of one another	Allow the most gifted to behave at a lower standard or treat others in a lesser fashion.
Build trust – help athletes learn to rely on each other and get to know each other as human beings	Allow some players to stay removed. Neglect opportunities to help players bond.

Internal vs. External Locus of Control. The third factor in the construct of POS is defined by one’s sense of internal causality and orientation toward personal responsibility. The more internal locus of control (LOC) we possess, the more we feel that our destiny is in our own

hands. It could be contrasted to an external LOC or an orientation that views *cause* as an external factor and one in which life “happens to us.” An internal locus of control can be defined as the belief that one is the author of his or her own fate. An internal locus of control comes from having a causal understanding of behavior and effect. Another term we could use for internal locus of control is “personal empowerment.”

Some things we can do to promote either an internal (what we want) or external locus of control (what we don't want)

Promoting and Internal Locus of Control	Promoting an External Locus of Control
Increase the opportunities for players to make their own choices and live with the consequences	Treat players like you do not trust them to make decisions or be overly critical of them when they make bad choices.
Positive recognitions for effort and investment – win or lose.	Personal praise about them as people and how happy you are about the way they played when things went well.
Make it “their team.” Help them make the rules, create a culture, innovate practice routines, choose their uniforms, etc.	Let them know it is “your team” and they better make you happy and do what you say or else.
Hold players responsible. Don't accept excuses. They can make the rules, but someone needs to make sure that consequences are applied fairly and non-personally.	Ask players for excuses when they violate a rule, consider the excuse as acceptable or not. Train them to make more excuses, or look for ways to get around consequences.
Stress integrity and being self-directed, and honest with oneself.	Stress the severity of your punishments and make them afraid of what you might do if they cross you.

A school with a POS will outperform expectations. The same is true with teams. We see examples of this all the time. And we see examples of the sad alternative – talented teams with a POF that underperform. The attitudes that contribute to long-term sustained winning and POS look the same everywhere. There is only one valid path to success, but many roads to mediocrity/POF. The great leaders intentionally stay on that road and trust that results will follow.

Athletic programs have the capacity to bring a success mindset and culture to a school like no other aspect of the school. But we need to recognize that every choice we make as a part of that program is either contributing to more POS and a success climate or a POF and mediocrity. Let's quit asking the question, “who is turning out?” and instead ask ourselves the question, “how can we best infuse a POS across our schools?” starting with how we run our programs.

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