The Art of Establishing a Practical Practice Schedule
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Abstract
This essay explores the benefits and drawbacks of four different coaching approaches: (a) standardized weekly coaching sessions, (b) variable weekly sessions, (c) standardized team practice times, and (d) come when you want. Each one of these organizational strategies is reviewed in relation to (a) the size and expertise of coaching staff, (b) team size, and (c) program goals. Additionally, it briefly discusses approaches toward peer coaching and length of coaching sessions.

Some of my favorite memories as a forensicator are of coaching sessions. Whether it was my teammate teaching me how to dance like a stripper as we washed our jeans at the local laundromat (an act that I never quite mastered), or a late afternoon session with my coach where we spent an hour and half perfecting the introduction to my persuasion, I always found coaching sessions to be an interesting mix of fun and learning. These moments helped shape me as the educator and coach I am today. The expression, that the key to success is practice, practice, practice is never truer than in forensics. Coaching is the foundation of both the educational and competitive goals of our activity. One-on-one sessions allow students and coaches to get to know each other, fostering personal and professional relationships between both participants. Most importantly, coaching sessions cultivate a learning environment that adds to each student's education. Establishing a coaching schedule that is practical and effective for both students and can be challenging and demanding. Multiple approaches exist, each holding their own merits and posing unique challenges. When deciding what type of coaching schedule works best for your program, there are a variety of considerations to evaluate before you select the schedule that is right for you. Factors include (a) the size and expertise of your coaching staff, (b) size of your team, and (c) the overarching goals of your program. Each one of these factors will be discussed in greater detail in regard to the four common organizational approaches. The four types of practice schedules include: (a) standardized weekly coaching sessions, (b) variable weekly sessions, (c) standardized team practice times, and (d) what I refer to as "come when you want."

For individuals who prefer routine, offering standardized coaching may be a good fit. This organizational approach allows coaches to schedule weekly appointments around class schedules, department meetings and other personal and professional obligations. For example, at the beginning of the semester, a coach schedules an hour or half hour set coaching meeting with members of his/her team. These meetings will be the same every week (or every other if you have a large team) for the entire semester. This approach has three advantages.

Standardized individual coaching

For individuals who prefer routine, offering standardized coaching may be a good fit. This organizational approach allows coaches to schedule weekly appointments around class schedules, department meetings and other personal and professional obligations. For example, at the beginning of the semester, a coach schedules an hour or half hour set coaching meeting with members of his/her team. These meetings will be the same every week (or every other if you have a large team) for the entire semester. This approach has three advantages.
First, it allows you to micro-manage the events on your team. At almost all times, a coach is aware of the events being run on his or her team and the progress students are making on their individual events. Such meetings allow coaches to interact with team members and monitor the team's progress toward their goals. Second, this approach can foster strong working relationships between coaches and students. These weekly meetings provide an opportunity to learn more about each other. From a social perspective, a good understanding of their experiences and perceptions are crucial in order to effectively coach a student. Third, this approach provides comfort for coaches and students who thrive under structure. For many, predictability not only provides comfort but is crucial to their success. This approach can be helpful to coaches who may have obligations such as child care or other employment that demands a rigid schedule.

Still, this approach is not without obstacles. The most obvious is the downside of predictability: inflexibility. For coaches whose weekly schedules vary greatly, this coaching approach can prove problematic. Also, some find the standardization of practice can waste time for both students and coaches. If a student has not worked on his/her events since the previous coaching session, both coach and student may experience an uncomfortable feeling of deja vu. Additionally, if you coach a large team and have a small coaching staff (maybe even just you) then it may be difficult to coach every student every week. Finally, this approach does not prioritize events or students, which can be problematic if a student needs more than one hour a week and you cannot offer additional coaching time or you have a poor working relationship with a member of your team.

*Variable weekly coaching*

When it comes to coaching, flexibility is the cornerstone of this organizational approach. Typically, variable coaching is when you allow students to sign-up for individual coaching sessions weekly. The availability and quantity of the coaching slots varies week-to-week. In general, students schedule these appointments at the teams' weekly meetings. This method also is a smart choice for many reasons. First, it provides the agility that many coaches prefer and demand. For overworked coaches, variable coaching allows you to control and actually manage your hectic agenda. Not only do some coaches favor this method, but many students prefer this approach because their work load varies week to week. Another advantage of this approach is that you allow students to choose their level of commitment to the activity. Coaching is a large part of an educational experience for some students, while others work better with peers or alone. For a team with a large coaching staff, this allows students to coach primarily with the coach they prefer. Finally, this approach allows the coach the option to coach more or less during different points in the season. In other words, you can increase availability during times of high demand such as the beginning of the year and before your state or national tournament.

While this strategy does seem to be the most common coaching approach it also is not without problems. First, students can easily fall under the radar if you
aren't conscious of who is signing up. Also, if your team is large, and your coaching staff is not, then students can become frustrated with the limited availability of coaching that may fit their schedule. This approach can also limit your ability to plan your week in advance. While the coach ultimately has control because they choose when to offer coaching times, he/she may need to offer more time slots to assure that students have options for coaching availability. Therefore, you can not be sure what time slots will not be taken and plan your week accordingly.

**Standardized team practice**

This approach to is akin to high school athletic practice schedules. Here a team has a scheduled time to practice with their coaching staff. For example, a team may meet Monday through Thursday from 4-6 pm, or they meet every Tuesday and Thursday evening to work on their events. While not the most common approach this can be a successful way of establishing a schedule for smaller programs and teams that are linked to an academic course. Some schools allow students to receive practicum hours for their participation on a team and some even require communication majors to compete at least one semester during their collegiate experience. A standardized team practice offers the same benefits as the standardized individual practice and also a transparent practice time for students who are required to participate in forensics. For the student who is participating in forensics to meet a graduation requirement, this style of practicing can prove to be systematic and practical. Perhaps the most glaring benefit of this approach is the ability to incorporate students and faculty in the coaching process. By coaching at the same time, students and coaches can provide feedback to performances, allowing students to learn much by watching their teammates practice.

While this approach can be effective, its limitations are diverse. With regard to efficiency, team practice sessions can limit individual students' progress (unless you have a lot of rooms to run a variety of performances). Additionally, it is challenging to find a specific time where all members of the team and coaching staff are available for team practice.

**Come when you want**

The last line of attack a coach may choose is what I refer to as "come whenever you want." This approach toward coaching is simply maintaining extended office hours and allow students who are nearby and have extra time to coach to stop by. While this ideal seems crazy to me now, it worked well for me as a graduate student. The students knew when I would be in the office and were welcome to come by and visit or coach. For me, it was a welcome break from my studies and led to both productive and not so productive coaching sessions. For coaches who spend an extended amount of time in the office that is not designated for a particular task, this approach may be appealing. Also, small programs can excel under this format.
Still, common pitfalls can occur. The most common result of this coaching style is numerous students visiting your office. This can be a double edge situation. It is nice for students to have a place on campus to pass the time between classes. However, it can also be difficult to be productive when members of your team are hanging out in your office (if you are lucky enough to have a work space for your team, this challenge evaporates). This approach typically works best for coaches whose daily schedule allows interruption and welcomes a bit of chaos.

A note on peer coaching

Thus far, this discussion has neglected the role peer coaching can play in your teams practice schedule. For many teams, peer coaching is an integral aspect of a student's competitive and educational success. The numbers of approaches to organizing peer coaching are endless. If you have a large team, it is common to assign event captains—students who coach all members of the team who compete in a specific event. Often this is a responsibility taken on by senior or varsity members of the team and is scheduled between the event captain and other team members. Another approach is a scheduled peer coaching time and meeting place for students who want to work with each other. For example, students meet every Wednesday evening to run their events or assist each other in research, writing, or memorizing. Some programs find a less formal approach to peer coaching to be a better fit. Regardless of your approach, peer coaching compliments the work done by your coaching staff and is instrumental to the social dynamics of effective group development.

Length of coaching sessions

You may also be wondering how long your individualized coaching sessions should be. Some coaches prefer thirty minute coaching sessions, others prefer forty five minutes and many enjoy hour long sessions. The thirty minute practice session, allow you to coach more events, but requires that you are efficient in your interaction with the students. The forty-five minute session allows the student to perform more than one event if desired or this span of time can allow the coach and student the opportunity to really deconstruct a specific performance. An hour-long session can provide time for in-depth script editing and delivery polishing.

As you establish a practice schedule for your team, you should play to the strengths of your coaching style, professional demands, and team dynamics. Often finding the best fit for your program is simply trail and error. Plus, what works at the beginning of your coaching career may not be useful later in your career or be effective with different groups of students. Coaching sessions are the foundation of your program; how you choose to manage and organize them can influence your team culture, competitive success and the quality of instruction.