A Symposium On The Role Of The Assistant Director Of Forensics

ISSUES IN THE RELATIONAL DYNAMIC OF THE DIRECTOR/ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: REACTIONS FROM THE RESPECTIVE POSITIONS

Larry Schnoor and Keith D. Green *

Numerous articles and convention panels have addressed issues concerned with various elements related to forensic activities: the coaching of events, sources of materials, the use of original material in forensic competition, the funding and support of forensic programs, and a myriad of other concerns. One area that has not received the same degree of attention is the relationship between the Director of Forensics and the Assistant Director of Forensics; however, this relationship can greatly affect the entire forensic program at institutions with this administrative arrangement. While the impact of such a relationship may appear obvious, many individuals may not realize the conscious effort that is necessary to assure a successful relationship between the individuals involved in such a situation.

Since the Director/Assistant Director relationship is vital to successful operation of an effective program, it is important to investigate the dynamics of this relationship. Through this investigation, the relational dynamics and the effect of those dynamics on the Director, the Assistant Director, and ultimately the team itself are considered. By examining these areas, one gets a clearer definition of who the Assistant is, what his/her role is and/or should be, and one hopefully gleans some practical considerations about the relationship.

The authors' purpose was to utilize their experiences as a foundation for analyzing that relationship. The authors have worked together for the past two and a half years and, in an effort to examine their own working relationship, formulated a list of questions to which each reacted independently. The questions emphasized the interpersonal dynamics, but also considered more practical concerns. These questions were largely based on the out-
line and discussion of the SCA panel, "The Assistant Director of Forensics: Just Who Is This Person?" presented at the 1988 SCA convention.

The initial intention was to present both the Director's and the Assistant Director's answers; however, after reviewing the respective responses and discovering a high degree of similarity, the authors present a compilation of their answers. While these answers describe the philosophy and attitude of this specific relationship, they are not meant to be prescriptive. Rather, they are intended to describe one relationship between a Director and an Assistant as a foundation for investigation.

**QUESTION #1: How may a Director/Assistant Director enhance their ability to work together as a team?**

This question assumes that it is desirable for the Director and the Assistant Director to work together as a team; the authors agree with that assumption. In whatever role assignments exist within a program, it is essential that the individuals work together in a harmonious manner. The key element to ensure this harmonious relationship is cooperation.

This atmosphere of cooperation must begin with the initial interview. When interviewing, both the Director and Assistant should address such issues as the purpose of the team, the role of competition in the activity, goals the team and the students should strive toward, and the type of time commitment each is expected to contribute. If these issues are not addressed in the interview process, the Director and Assistant Director are courting potential conflict. Clearly, there are differing attitudes on each of these issues.

Once the school year begins, it becomes extremely difficult and possibly divisive to come to grips with these issues. The Director and Assistant Director should take every opportunity to exchange information between them, and the communication should flow both directions. It would be best if this exchange of information were accomplished in a fashion that avoided the "I am telling you to do . . . .", but rather that it be in the manner of, "How should we . . . ?" The "we" factor is important. To work as a "team," the team members should observe the practice the basic principles of effective interpersonal communication.

Most important, the Assistant should be made to feel a part of the administrative team. Once the Assistant begins to feel he/she has no input in team decision-making, he/she becomes nothing more than coach and van driver. This situation has the potential to
reduce job satisfaction significantly and can, in fact, create discord in the Director/Assistant Director relationship. This discord could easily be perceived by the team members. If an Assistant is hired with the understanding that he/she will be part of the program administration unit, not to fulfill this expectation may doom the quality of leadership the Assistant will be able to provide.

*QUESTION* #2: What issues may cause a problem in the relationship between the Director and the Assistant Director, and how may these issues be effectively resolved?

Before addressing specific issues, it is important to assert what hopefully is obvious to most: any and all conflict between the Director and Assistant Director should be kept confidential. While differences of opinion are natural, it is vital that the administrative team present a unified front to the students. This is not meant as a deception; it is meant to give the team a sense of stability and leadership. Once students perceive the Director and the Assistant Director haggling in public or talking behind each others' backs, respect is lost. This creates divisiveness, not only in team administration, but in the team itself. Clearly, this sort of poor management is not acceptable.

First and foremost, the major issue that can cause conflict is a lack of role definition. One reason that role definition is so important is that the Assistant Director's role does not seem as well-defined as the Director's role. In some cases, the Assistant Director is a glorified van driver; whereas, in other cases, the Assistant Director is an integral part of the administrative unit. Typical job listings for a Director of Forensics are more specific in the duties to be associated with that position, such as budget management, tournament administration, scheduling, coaching, and travel. However, the Assistant Director position does not benefit from such common definition; therefore, the two individuals (or more in some cases) must lay out their expectations very clearly to each other.

Perhaps the most typical area for differences of opinion resides in common, everyday decisions; for example, in making decisions on the tournament schedule, budgeting, and so forth, the Director and Assistant Director may differ. Of course, this in and of itself is not bad. It may generate a healthy discussion of alternatives and reasons for those alternatives. Moreover, if a Director/Assistant Director relationship is completely free of any differences of opinion along these lines, the situation may actually reflect the Assis-
tant Director's not being comfortable with approaching the Director.

The point to consider is that any issue has the potential to cause some conflict in the working relationship between the Director and the Assistant Director. The key is how that conflict is resolved. It needs to be resolved in a healthy, mutually-productive fashion. Through a consensus-building process, it is hoped the best decisions for the team will emerge. If both parties utilize effective conflict resolution skills, then conflict will enhance the program, not hurt it.

Finally, it is important to remember that the Director is the one in charge. While teamwork is an ideal, realistically the Director is the person accountable to the administration, the students, and the funding organization for the program. He/she must make decisions with which he/she feels comfortable. It is naive to assume that harmony will always exist; however, by "practicing what we preach," using effective communication skills, the working relationship can thrive.

**QUESTION #3: What can the Director do that would enhance the position of the Assistant Director in the forensic community?**

This question assumes that the Assistant Director wants to be "enhanced" in the forensic community. There could be situations where the Assistant Director has elected to remain in the background as much as possible. If there is clear and open communication between the individuals involved, the Director should be aware of the Assistant Director's desires along these lines.

On the other hand, assuming the Assistant Director desires more visibility, the Director could help in this process by doing any of the following:

- encouraging participation in convention programs;
- allowing the Assistant Director to attend tournaments with the Director being in attendance;
- local, regional, and/or national committee appointments;
- allowing for high visibility in tournament management.

By demonstrating to other programs that the Assistant Director is an involved member of the program, the Assistant Director will hopefully gain the reputation needed to achieve his or her professional goals.

**QUESTION #4: What should be the role of the Assistant Director in the administration of the program?**

The element of role-taking may be affected by the experience level of the individuals concerned. In some cases, it may be that
the Assistant Director has more experience than the Director does. Whatever the experience level, it should be remembered at most institutions the individual who is recognized as the Director is the person in charge and who is responsible to the institution for the workings and management of the forensics program. This is not to say that the Assistant Director should have no involvement; instead, it simply means that there could be those situations in which the Director may have to assume total control. Ideally, the most harmonious working relationship would be for the administration to be a shared function.

If the Assistant Director is to be considered a forensic professional, he/she should have some responsibility for all aspects of team management. Granted, specific situations will tend to dictate a certain division of labor. For example, a program with a Director of Forensics who is also accompanied by Directors for Individual Events and Debate calls for a specific breakdown of duties. A graduate student as Assistant Director may also present limitations from the standpoints of authority and accountability. Moreover, there are certain needs of those who serve in a fulltime faculty Assistant Director position.

The fulltime faculty member hired specifically as an Assistant Director of Forensics should be an active part of the program's administrative team. On one hand, if that Assistant Director is intent on moving on eventually to become a Director of Forensics (as many are), then he/she needs the experience of duties required to run an effective program. On the other hand, what about the Assistant who is content to be the Assistant? If the person does not anticipate assuming the Director's role (at least not in the foreseeable future), should he/she also share these duties? The answer is a resounding "yes," for several reasons.

First, by having a consensus-oriented management team, both the Assistant Director and the Director will be able to communicate with other programs, state and national organizations, and the local institution's Administration with a consistent philosophy and direction. An established Assistant Director is often called upon to voice the stance of his/her program on issues.

Second, interpersonal relations with team members can be consistent among the leadership of the team. One job of the Director and Assistant Director is modeling discipline and professionalism for the students, as well as directing the maintenance of that discipline. Student behavior at tournaments, student coaching sessions, and team dynamics all have to be monitored. If the Assistant Director and Director are not consistent in their approaches to
handling these matters, divisiveness can again result. Students have been known to play one coach off against another, developing mini-games that cause conflict not only between the students and coaches, but among the coaches as well. Assistant Director involvement in the development of team atmosphere, policies, and rules of behavior is essential to maintain these team dynamics effectively.

Finally, the Assistant Director should be considered a professional able to fulfill all duties of the Director. Unfortunately the ideal of a smooth transition does not always exist due to illness or other incapacitating situations. The Assistant Director should be able to assume the direction of the program any time.

**QUESTION #5: If graduate assistants are used in the program, where do they fit into the relationship between the Director and the Assistant Director?**

In those programs which have the luxury of graduate assistants' participation, a chain of command should be established. The normal assumption might be that the graduate assistants would function under the Assistant Director. The staff might decide that the Assistant Director have responsibility for the supervision of the graduate assistants.

Team members will perceive the graduate assistants in a supervisory role if the Director and Assistant Director treat the graduate assistants in such a manner. Moreover, since the graduate students are in an intermediate position between the team members and the Director/Assistant Director, they can play a special role in team maintenance. Since team members may have more direct contact with the graduate assistants, the communication between the two may tend to be more informal and open. These communication channels are quite normal and can, in fact, allow for a healthy venting of frustration and doubt. Thus, the Director and Assistant Director should treat the graduate students as an integral part of the program staff who can assume coaching and team maintenance duties.

The role of graduate assistants in a forensic program should be an issue that is clearly understood and agreed upon by the Director and the Assistant Director. It should be handled carefully in order to avoid the possibility of the graduate assistants playing the Director and the Assistant Director against each other. Again, the decision may be that the Director is the person in total control and at the top of the chain of command.
QUESTION #6: What should be the roles of the Director and the Assistant Director in their interactions with team members?

A situation which may, on the surface, seem ideal is one in which both the Director and Assistant Director can function equivalently. However, there are some advantages to having different, but clearly understood, roles for interacting with team members. For example, since the Director will usually be seen as the ultimate authority for the team, he/she might assume the role of disciplinarian while the Assistant Director might assume a role of listener and counselor. Of course, this is not to say that the Director should be a cold-hearted beast. Rather, giving the students two avenues of approach allows for multiple problem solving methods. What is important here is that the Director and Assistant Director remember that, as two unique individuals, they may have very distinct styles of interaction.

One situation that should be avoided, however, is one in which the Director and Assistant Director have each identified specific students as "their" students. This has the potential of creating intra-team conflict as well as conflict between the Director and the Assistant Director. Even greater care toward impartiality must be taken if graduate assistants are involved.

Clearly, common understanding and agreement as to the roles played are important. Staff should be clear about avoiding the types of interactions with students which can cause disruption to the overall harmonious development of the team as a total unit.

QUESTION #7: How should the situation be handled in which the Assistant Director is seeking a new position as a Director of Forensics? And, what role should the Director now play in this situation?

This situation will be affected by the type of relationship that already exists between the individuals concerned. If the relationship has not been positive, the Assistant Director may look for a new position and may not want the Director to be informed nor involved in the process at all. Needless to say, this may be an uncomfortable situation. If the relationship has been positive, the Director should endeavor to be as encouraging as possible, especially if it would mean an advancement for the Assistant Director. This encouragement might take the form of information about any openings that are known to the Director, by giving strong, positive recommendations, and by serving as a resource for professional information about possible positions.

A potential danger can arise out of differing commitments to the program. If a Director sees his/her Assistant Director as an
integral part of building the program, and if the Director has a personal vested interest in the team, it is possible that he or she may feel threatened by the desire of the Assistant Director to leave. However, what any Director must remember is that forensics is a job; in other words, even though it is the chosen profession for the Assistant Director, ultimately it is a means of support, ego satisfaction, and personal growth. If the Assistant Director believes he or she can better fulfill these goals elsewhere, the Director should be understanding and supportive.

To discourage the Assistant Director from considering other avenues of employment, whether those avenues are in forensics or elsewhere, courts potential danger. If the Assistant Director maintains his/her position merely out of a feeling of obligation, how effective can that individual really be? Due to the commitment required to be an effective forensic educator, if the Assistant Director is not satisfied, he/she will not have the personal stamina necessary to help the program grow. The area of personal growth will be the first area directly influenced by the quality of the relationship and communication patterns that have been developed between the Director and the Assistant Director.

**QUESTION #8: Should the Assistant Director's position be regarded as a professional (terminal) position?**

From the answer thus far, it is clear that the answer is a resounding "yes." In fact, there could be some distinct advantages to the Assistant Director's position. If one wishes to engage in research, whether in forensics or other areas, more time is available to the Assistant Director due to lack of administrative duties which are associated with the Director's position. If the Assistant Director gets significant pleasure out of classroom teaching, not being the Director can allow for a heavier class load, thus potentially increasing that avenue of job satisfaction. Simply put, for some the combination of forensics, classroom teaching and research time found in the position of Assistant Director of Forensics is what he/she is seeking. For this person, it is a satisfying "terminal" position.

From these ideas, several themes emerge that seem important to an effective Director/Assistant Director relationship. First, open communication should be conscientiously employed. Through clear and frequent interaction, the Director/Assistant Director relationship can develop a level of trust and mutual understanding necessary to help ensure a smooth working rapport, effective job performance, job satisfaction, and maintenance of team cohesion.
Second, role definition is necessary to establish clear expectations and duties. Through this role definition, each party may be more comfortable in his/her expectations of each other and themselves. An important conclusion here seems to be that this role definition should begin as part of the initial interview process. Furthermore, it is equally important to note that just as with any relationship, each Director/Assistant Director team must work out their own understanding and dynamics.

Third, the Assistant Director should be considered as a professional seeking self-fulfillment and personal growth through the Assistant Director position. Just because the Assistant Director is not in the Director position does not make him/her any less committed or involved in the profession. For some, the Assistant Director position is a quality, terminal position, just as the Director position is for others.

Considering these areas from the perspective of the authors is but one approach. Research, especially quantitative in nature, to define the status quo and to give a statistical base for further delineation of the role of the Assistant Director of Forensics is certainly warranted.

Through a clear understanding of who the Assistant Director of Forensics is and what role he/she is to play in a program, the knowledge and talents of that Assistant Director may be put to best use. Without quality interaction and the utilization of sound management principles, the effectiveness of the Assistant Director, the Director/Assistant Director relationship, and ultimately the team itself may suffer.