

A pink eraser is shown in the center of the image, with red shavings scattered around it on a light-colored surface. The text is overlaid on the eraser and shavings.

THE TOP 10 COACHING
MISTAKES I'VE MADE

...

Kate Boyd



I've got more than a decade of coaching cheerleading under my belt. While that means I've got more than 10 years worth of triumphs to smile about, I've also got 10 years of ugly mistakes that make me cringe a little every time I think of them.

I had to learn from these mistakes the hard way, but I don't want you to have to suffer the same way I did. So I'll give you a heads up on 10 of the biggest mistakes I've made over the years and how you may be able to do better than me.

MISTAKE #10



TRYING TO BE
THEIR FRIEND

MISTAKE #10: TRYING TO BE THEIR FRIEND

I thought that relationship with my cheerleaders meant I had to be their pal.

When I first started coaching, I was in high school, but my first real coaching job was after I graduated. I went back to coach my old squad. BAD IDEA. I was friends with these cheerleaders, and it was incredibly hard to be an authoritative figure to those with whom you spent hours on bus rides goofing around.

Then I did it again. At another coaching job, I thought that relationship with my cheerleaders meant that I had to be their pal. So I let them talk more than they should have or let a few small but important things slip by. In the end, they may have ended up as pretty good cheerleaders, but their character was not really impacted by my presence there.

MISTAKE #10: TRYING TO BE THEIR FRIEND

My job as a coach is to love them, serve them, and be authentic with them ...

I know now that many different kinds of relationships exist in the world, and that my job as a coach is to love them, serve them, and be authentic with them as I teach and lead them. That's what really makes a difference in their lives.

So get to know them and goof off with them sometimes too, but remember that to be a good coach you have to be more than their friend. You have to be their teacher and mentor.

MISTAKE #9



WINGING IT
AT PRACTICE

MISTAKE #9: WINGING IT AT PRACTICE

My first step into the coaching world was teaching tumbling and technique at a small cheer gym near my hometown. Being a senior in high school, I was more concerned with my paycheck than with doing the best job I could do. Don't get me wrong, I loved it there (most of the time), but I didn't really apply myself.

Later in life, the same thing would happen. Only this time, it's because I was complacent. I thought, "Hey, I know what I'm doing. Why plan? I'll just throw some stations together or we'll do a little bit of this and that and the magic will happen." That was also wrong. So very wrong.

MISTAKE #9: WINGING IT AT PRACTICE

Everything you do in practice should be with a purpose, intentional.

There will be times when your plan goes out the window or that you just didn't get a chance to put something together. And I'm here to tell you that's okay ... as long as it's the exception and not the rule. Everything you do in practice should be with a purpose, intentional. Otherwise, you're wasting time—not just yours, but theirs and their parents (and let me tell you, parents don't like that at all).

What I should have done each time was come to practice with a set of objectives, and if they are a task-driven group then I should have communicated those objectives to the team. Then we could work together, using a roughly laid out schedule for the practice, to reach those goals. It helps them focus (and sometimes chatter less) and helps me know how to use our practice time effectively.

MISTAKE #8



KEEPING IT ALL
BUSINESS
ALL THE TIME

MISTAKE #8: KEEPING IT ALL BUSINESS ALL THE TIME

I am a task-oriented person. Writing a to-do list and checking off the items as I do them gives me immense satisfaction. Yes, I have, at times, swung to the extreme of trying to be so people-oriented that I let the team do whatever they want because I want them to like me and be their friend. But I most usually swing to the opposite side.

I love getting things done, and it stresses me out to not accomplish anything. Seriously. It's a flaw that I'm working diligently on. But it can't be "all work and no play," especially with teenagers. If they know it's all work, they will rebel and find ways to disrupt practice so they get their fill of fun too.

MISTAKE #8: KEEPING IT ALL BUSINESS ALL THE TIME

If the team knows that there will be fun built in, they will be much more willing to work hard ...

That's why I should've been building fun into my schedules and making room for the light-hearted moments. I used to think that if we accomplished all of our objectives then we should just keep working, we're obviously on a roll. But I should've said, "Wow. We got everything done today that we needed to. So let's take the last 15 minutes of practice to hang out and play some games."

If the team knows that there will be fun built in, they will be much more willing to work hard during the times to work hard. Give them some space, some time to build relationships, and a little bit of celebration.

MISTAKE #7



NOT TAKING
ADVANTAGE OF THE
PLATFORM I HAD
BEEN GIVEN

MISTAKE #7: NOT TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE PLATFORM I HAD BEEN GIVEN

As you know by now, I started coaching when I was young. At that point in my life, I didn't know how to do much of anything for someone else. It was all about what I needed to do or have done for me. So that's how I approached coaching.

I thought that if it wasn't making me happy or worse that I wasn't looking good as a coach because of my team, then something was wrong—and probably with them not me. (Ah, the selfishness of youth.) Everyone there—administrators, parents, and cheerleaders—was there to serve me.

MISTAKE #7: NOT TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE PLATFORM I HAD BEEN GIVEN

We have an amazing platform to serve others and make them better ...

But that was a seriously faulty mindset. The truth is, as coaches we have an amazing platform to serve others and make them better ... better athletes, better leaders, better people.

If I had focused on that, then I not only would have had a smoother year but also a more impactful one. In the end, I would have looked better as a coach, the team would have gone further athletically and personally, and everyone would have had a much better experience.

MISTAKE #6



NOT DELEGATING
TO COACHES AND
CAPTAINS

MISTAKE #6: NOT DELEGATING TO COACHES AND CAPTAINS

I remember the first time I had an assistant coach. I had no idea what to do with her. She was great. She knew cheerleading, and she had some qualities that I didn't which made for a great balance. But I honestly underutilized her and her talents.

I turned it into a competition. I wanted to be the favorite, so anything she did I tried to do better. What a disaster I was! I'm still a disaster, but I at least learned from that particular moment of chaos.

MISTAKE #6: NOT DELEGATING TO COACHES AND CAPTAINS

Your team leaders are uniquely qualified to speak on behalf of their peers.

I should have looked at my list of responsibilities and given her tasks in which I would bomb and she would thrive. I also should have given her ownership of parts of practice or certain areas with the team so that I wasn't constantly undermining her creativity and leadership.

I also think that I've not relied on the leaders I chose for the team as much as I should have either. I choose them for their leadership ability then I don't let them lead. Makes no sense, right?

Your team leaders are uniquely qualified to speak on behalf of their peers. They've got their finger on the pulse, so you've

MISTAKE #6: NOT DELEGATING TO COACHES AND CAPTAINS

They will fight harder for your team's unity if they have a part in it.

got to really look to them for some of your decisions that affect the team. It's important also that they have some ownership of portions of practice in front of the squad, and make sure they have it on the sideline too.

I have also learned the necessity of mentoring these leaders even more deeply than I would the whole team. Nurture their qualities and creativity.

Prepare them for their next steps and the world outside of cheerleading. Let them take a peek behind the curtain to see the behind-the-scenes work you do, and give them a say in some of it. They will fight harder for your team's unity if they have a part in it.

MISTAKE #5



NOT ASKING FOR
HELP WHEN I
NEEDED IT

MISTAKE #5: NOT ASKING FOR HELP WHEN I NEEDED IT

I ignored the fact that that particular need existed because I couldn't do it well on my own.

I was always pretty good at stunting and choreography. I can organize and create systems that help, but I was not always good at the relational aspect of cheerleading. In fact, for years, I ignored the fact that that particular need even existed because I couldn't do it well on my own. So squads suffered for it. Team members suffered for it. Parents suffered for it.

I needed help. I needed someone to show me the ropes. I needed a mentor or an assistant with those skills to learn from ... but I refused to admit that I couldn't do it. I didn't want help because it would show that I'm not a good coach. (Man, I laugh and cry at my old self sometimes.)

MISTAKE #5: NOT ASKING FOR HELP WHEN I NEEDED IT

What makes you a good coach is that you recognizes your own weaknesses, and you find those who can fill the gaps ...

But that's not true. Maybe for you it's the more technical stuff like stunting, tumbling, or jumping. Maybe you can't put formations together. Maybe you're bad at organizing, coordinating, or communicating. You are not alone. We all have an area in which we are weak.

What makes you a good coach is that you recognize your own weaknesses, and you find those who can fill the gaps or show you how to fill the gaps. You should always be learning and growing, just like the young cheerleaders you work with.

Ask for help or look for specific places to find help like conferences, courses, books, or other coaches. People won't think you're weak. They will think you want to be the best you can be to help your team be the best it can be inside and out.

MISTAKE #4



COMMUNICATING
POORLY

MISTAKE #4: COMMUNICATING POORLY

Good communication is a gift you can give and receive.

In college, I was a journalism and mass communication major. My first job out of college was for the university writing feature articles about students and alumni. Today, I work at a nonprofit in the marketing department as a writer and social media coordinator. I tell you all of that to tell you this ...

Until about last year I was a very poor communicator (and I still have my moments), and it drastically affected my relationships with cheerleaders and parents.

Good communication is a gift you can give and receive. Good communication is crucial in almost every relationship you can imagine. And here's the key ... thinking about your audience.

MISTAKE #4: COMMUNICATING POORLY

And here's the key ... thinking about your audience.

This means that sometimes you don't get to speak your mind the way you want to. It also means that you will have to say what they need to hear instead of what you want to say all the time.

They (meaning cheerleaders, or more commonly, parents) have a concern ... they don't want to hear you get defensive and angry. They want you to listen, acknowledge the validity of their concern, look into it, and show that you truly have their best interest at heart. They want to feel like confident adults or teenagers. They want all of the information so they don't have to feel any more anxious than necessary. They want to be complimented genuinely. They want to be heard.

You can do all of that through good communication. Don't botch it like I did for 10+ years.

MISTAKE #3



NOT MAKING
PARENTS A
PRIORITY

MISTAKE #3: NOT MAKING PARENTS A PRIORITY

One year, I was working at a small private school in Texas as their head cheerleading coach. They had a pretty good year. Even at summer cheer camp, we won two trophies—more than they had ever gotten before at that point in the season. We were on our way to having the best skills as a cheerleading squad that their school had ever had, but I made a mistake.

I didn't make parents a priority. I thought if the girls did well and had fun then they would see that I was good for their team. In fact, it didn't even occur to me that it might be otherwise, but it turned ugly as we were preparing for tryouts. One parent decided to raise the other parents against me, and they all said their daughters wouldn't be trying out the next year. Because of me.

MISTAKE #3: NOT MAKING PARENTS A PRIORITY

The administration stood by me, but in the end there was nothing they could do. No girls, no squad, no job for Kate. I think it may have been prevented if I made parents a priority. I will make a disclaimer here though: no matter what you do, you cannot control other people and their actions. You can do all you can, but some will still fight against you. This is life.

But here's what I should have done that year: made myself more available to parents, listened until my ears were numb, politely and encouragingly addressed their concerns instead of defending myself, given some buy-in to the more high maintenance parents, communicated clearly and often, and constantly bragged about their child to them in person and in private every time I saw them.

MISTAKE #2



PUTTING
TROPHIES
FIRST

MISTAKE #2: PUTTING TROPHIES FIRST

There's much more to cheerleading than showing off or being the best.

I was never a competitive cheerleader. In fact, until high school, I didn't realize anything like that existed or I probably would've left high school cheerleading and went straight to one of the thousands of gyms in my area and been completely happy.

Yep. I'm competitive. I love to win. I love to be the best. So I assumed that's what everyone else wanted out of their cheerleading experience ... what I never got to be. (Let's all pray I don't try the same thing on my children.) But as it turns out, there's much more to cheerleading than showing off or being the best (although there are moments where that is perfectly acceptable).

MISTAKE #2: PUTTING TROPHIES FIRST

Cheerleading is about encouraging others, working together, and building confident leaders.

Cheerleading is about encouraging others, working together, and building confident leaders. But I made it all about the skills and because of that I missed incredible opportunities to love and nurture young ladies to meet their potential as human beings.

Cheerleading is more than skills, trophies, and applause. I wish I had recognized that sooner, so I wouldn't be sitting here regretting all of the lives that I could have made a tiny difference in if I had just recognized their potential.

MISTAKE #1



NOT BEING
CONFIDENT

MISTAKE #1: NOT BEING CONFIDENT

I can't spend my entire coaching career focused on what I'm not. I have to lean in to what I am

By now you can see that I have not been the best coach ever, and if I'm honest with myself I still have a LONG way to go. But here's the last thing I wish I had done, and I try to remind myself of it each day as I coach squads or other coaches.

Be confident in the place you are.

I'm not always a good communicator, administrator, or relationship builder ... but do you know what I am good at? Teaching cheerleading skills, organizing practices, and choreographing routines. While I should know my weaknesses and strive to be better, I can't spend my entire coaching career focused on what I am not. I have to lean in to what I am.

MISTAKE #1: NOT BEING CONFIDENT

Know your skills and talents. Work with them. Then find someone or some way to fill in the gaps where you are weak.

You've been selected as the cheerleading coach for a reason, and you've got to be confident in the skills that you know you possess. If you let yourself or others focus on your flaws, you'll never be able to reach your own potential, let alone help a young person reach theirs.

Know your skills and talents. Work with them. Then find someone or some way to fill in the gaps where you are weak, but never compare yourself or your squad to another (especially if they are further along in their journey than you are). You've got to be confident and lead from where you are now. If you're dedicated, you'll get to the other stuff in time.

Be here and be confident now because you are capable.

Whether you've been coaching for a day or for many years, I hope you found my story and mistakes helpful as you continue your journey to being the best coach you can be.

If you enjoyed it, I hope you will consider sharing it with others and joining me for more tips and conversations about coaching online.

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