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Developing a Team Mission Statement: Who are we? Where are we going? How are we going to get there?

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Abstract:

A mission statement defines a group's purpose, describes the beliefs in how a group should function, and indicates the unique values of a group. Few studies in sport have specifically investigated the influence of a mission statement, but several high-performance teams have cited mission statements as a key for improved team performance and functioning. Recently, it has become more common for consultants to provide overviews of team building interventions in sport. However, even with initial evidence that mission statements may be beneficial for team cohesion and performance, little has been written about the process of developing a mission statement in the sporting realm. Therefore, the purpose of the article is to outline the authors' experiences leading an activity to develop a season-long mission statementwith a collegiate varsity gymnastics team. Additionally, an overview of how the consultants gained entry and developed trust with the coaching staff and team, as well as reflections on what went well in the process and what could be enhanced for the greatest impact are discussed.

Keywords: Consulting, Cohesion, Mission Statement

Special thanks go out to athletes and coaches who permitted the authors to use the experiences working with the team as the subject of the current paper.

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** For the purpose of the article, the authors have framed the process as a single year's activity. However, to provide a wide-range of experiences to practitioners, and when appropriate, additional examples are drawn from subsequent years. Further, all examples are reflections from the practitioner perspective and not from athletes.

Coaches and athletes often seek a mental skills coach (MSC) to help develop mental skills, provide support to athletes and coaches, and ultimately, improve performance (Lauer, Driska, Cowburn, 2015; Wrisberg, Loberg, Simpson, Withycombe, & Reed, 2010). One manner in which MSC's can help encourage team building is through the development of a season-long, athlete-led, mission statement. A mission statement defines a group's purpose, describes the beliefs in how a group should function, and indicates the unique values of the group (Collins & Porras, 1991; Levin, 2000). This statement can highlight season priorities, improve communication and team efficiency, and provide a behavioral, normative, and structural roadmap for achieving group goals (Ireland & Hitt, 1992). The group's values and beliefs should be reflected in its mission statement (Collins & Porras, 1991) and should help ensure all individuals understand the direction of the group (Mullane, 2002). In the most general sense, a mission statement specifies "who the organization is and what it does" (Levin, 2000, p. 93).

Even though few studies in sport have investigated mission statements as the primary concept of interest, mission statements have been cited as a key reason for improved team performance and success. In an overview of effective team building interventions, Yukelson (1997) consistently indicated the positive impact a mission statement or team credo had on team cohesion and performance. Yukelson believed that a mission statement ensured all members were working for the betterment of the team, helped to synchronize efforts within the team, and allowed goal-directed discussion on how the group could work more effectively toward success.

Similarly, in a case study on the effectiveness of the New Zealand All Blacks rugby team, Hodge, Henry, and Smith (2014) cited the adoption of the statement "Better People Make Better All Blacks", as a critical aspect in shaping a beneficial motivational climate and positively impacting performance. Coaches believed the statement emphasized the selection of athletes who were self-reliant, able to manage their emotions, and likely to make connections with teammates. Even though mission statements were not the primary aspect of study, both of these investigations of high-performing teams indicated a mission statement helped contribute to overall team success.

Recently, it has become more common for MSCs to share examples of team building activities so other consultants can employ the activities into their own practice (e.g., Dunn & Holt, 2004; Pain & Harwood, 2009). For example, Dunn and Holt (2004) discussed the use of a personal-disclosure mutual-sharing team building activity with members of an intercollegiate hockey team as part of preparations for a national-championship tournament. Athletes believed sharing personal stories resulted in changes to athletes understanding of themselves and teammates, group closeness, and playing for their teammates. In a second team building intervention, Pain and Harwood (2009) explained how they used a series of open discussions across a competitive season with a university soccer team. The open discussions increased athlete perceptions of togetherness, inclusion, communication, and self-understanding. Both of these interventions clearly detailed the process and role of an MSC in the planning and delivery of a sport psychology intervention and saw positive outcomes for the teams involved. Clearly, there is merit in practitioners sharing and reflecting on their experiences in these team-building experiences.

Even though there is initial evidence that a mission statement can be beneficial to teams' performance and cohesion, very little has been written about the process of developing a team mission statement. Within applied practice, outside of a few exceptions (e.g., Dunn & Holt, 2004; Pain & Harwood, 2009), very few articles are devoted to describing specific activities designed for team building and increased team functioning. Therefore, the purpose of the manuscript is to outline the authors' experiences leading an activity to develop a season-long mission statement with a collegiate varsity gymnastics team. As context is critical to understanding an exercise (Brawley & Paskevich, 1997), a brief section will describe how MSCs gained entry and developed trust with the coaching staff and team. Next, developing a mission statement is outlined step-by step. Finally, the article concludes with a brief reflection on what went well in the process and what could be enhanced for additional impact.

Gaining Entry and Developing Trust

The first and second authors consulted with a collegiate gymnastics team for three seasons with the goals of improving performance, and enhancing athlete personal development and well-being for all team members. In the initial stages of the relationship, both consultants spent large amounts of time building rapport and establishing a trusting relationship with the team. During a typical week, the consultants jointly led a 30-minute mental training team session on a sport psychology construct or skill (e.g., positive self-talk, imagery, managing anxiety). Each consultant also attended at least one practice per week where they conducted informal check-in meetings during breaks in practice. Additionally, consultants held individual meetings with each athlete at the beginning of every semester (twice per year) and one-on-one sessions as desired by each team member to discuss goals and mental training needs.

By the end of the first year, the MSCs had a positive working relationship with the coaching staff, athletic training staff, and athletes. The team had just missed accomplishing their season goals for the previous year, and during end-of-year evaluations both athletes and coaches identified increased accountability among team members as an area of need in order to improve for the upcoming season. Coaches, too, wanted to establish a culture of excellence and high expectations in hope that extra attention to daily responsibilities and commitment to the small details would lead to a more successful season. In addition to a shift in expectations for returning athletes, there were a number of freshman athletes who were expected to immediately contribute to the team, and the coaches wanted to ensure these new athletes would understand the expectations of being a successful member of the team.

To begin developing a culture of accountability, the coaches invited the consultants to lead a pre-season overnight retreat with the team. The coaches gave the consultants freedom to lead any activities that they deemed would be beneficial to the team's upcoming season, but the coaches wanted the consultants to focus a large part of their time on sessions that would impact and shape team culture. The consultants decided that one way to move toward increasing accountability within the team was to lead in the development of a team mission statement. Having worked with the team for a full year, the consultants had developed a good working relationship with the returning athletes and coaches which was beneficial for the session.

Developing a mission statement:

Developing a mission statement requires the MSC to provide initial guidance to ensure the team has a firm understanding of the process. Once the team understands the goals of the session, the consultant serves largely as a facilitator for ideas and clarification. The goal for the session with the gymnastics team was to create a single mission statement that would guide

athlete behavior during the season. To ensure proper athlete engagement, during each stage of the mission statement creation, it was imperative that all members of the team were contributing. The consultants structured the session around three critical questions adapted from strategic planning sessions within the business sector. Specifically, athletes were asked to think about *"Who are we?", "Where are we going this year?" and "How are we going to get there?"*. Each question focused attention on a key aspect of the team. "Who are we?" directed the team to think about their team identity and what made the team unique in relation to other similar programs. "Where are we going this year?" focused on what the team wanted to achieve over the course of the year. Finally, "How are we going to get there?" helped athletes focus on the behaviors and strategies they would need to achieve their goals. Taken in sum, these questions addressed the team's central identity, goals for the season, and behaviors that would help them achieve success over the course of the season. It is important to note that even though the creation of the team mission statement is primarily athlete driven, the MSC should hold preliminary conversations with key stakeholders (i.e., coaches and returning athletes) to ensure the final product meets team needs. These conversations provide a guide for the concepts that should be explored by the MSC during the activity with probing questions, while ensuring that the athletes still feel autonomy as they create an individualized, athlete-driven mission.

Creating a team mission statement had three iterations that took just under two hours (see Figure 1 for a visual description of the process). For this team, 18 athletes were equally separated into four groups with an attempt at balancing the number of returning and incoming athletes across the four groups including distributing senior leaders evenly. Each group was then given the task of independently writing a unique mission statement that included aspects from each of the three critical questions (i.e., "Who are we?", "Where are we going this season?", and "How

are we going to get there?”). Additionally, the groups were expected to incorporate input from all group members in the creation of the statement. All members were expected to understand each aspect of their mission statement and be able to explain their group’s mission to the other members of the team. During this initial brainstorming session, the MSCs drifted among the groups asking contextual questions and probing to ensure the groups were progressing in the task. Sample questions included “What type of a team do you want to be part of this season?”, “As a team, what do you hope to accomplish this season?”, and “What do you think you’ll need to do to accomplish those goals?” This line of questioning was to make athletes think about the past year (if they were on the team) and the possible reasons for not achieving their goals that could be modified for a more successful season.

After sufficient time was given (approximately 15-20 minutes), the entire team met to present their initial statements. Each group elected one member to present their mission statement to the rest of the team and explain the rationale and motive for each part of their statement. After each group presented their unique mission statement, team members were encouraged to ask for clarification of any aspect of the mission that did not make sense or needed clarity. During this time, the consultant’s primary role was to probe any aspects of the mission statements that were unclear, vague, or ambiguous and to ensure that all members of the team had a clear understanding of each of the four unique mission statements. These clarifying statements were especially beneficial when one statement had unique points not included in other three. For example, one group’s mission statement emphasized success during the season would entail high achievement on the competition floor as well as in the classroom. This group reasoned that in past years several athletes’ poor academic performance had led to added stress and, ultimately, unfocused training. They believed if athletes could eliminate this unneeded

stress, practices would be more focused and productive. These thoughts would never have been apparent without the explanation from the group, and with this rationale in mind, each group believed that including this aspect in the mission statement moving forward was important. In these discussions, it may be helpful to use a flipchart to summarize key points that each group discusses so a visual representation of these comments exists for the remainder of the exercise.

Once all questions were answered and all aspects of the four mission statements were well-understood by the team, each group was combined with another to create two new groups. In this iteration, the task for each group was to create a new mission statement that incorporated the most critical aspects of the two smaller groups' original statements. Again, consultants urged that all members needed to contribute to the new statement, and a time limit was imposed on the groups (approximately 10-15 minutes). Athletes in this session talked about similarities and differences in the original mission statements and decided the most important aspects to include in the new statement. Consultants role in this iteration was to ensure groups were creating statements that incorporated the most important aspects from the original two statements while ensuring clarity and conciseness. In our exercise, one group struggled to write anything down because they wanted the first draft to be perfect, while the other group merely combined the two statements that made a product that was extremely long and lacked clarity. In both cases, consultants urged groups to create something that was clear, concise, and meaningful to the team. The two new mission statements had overlap (i.e., each group mentioned accountability and competitiveness), but each mission statement also had unique aspects (i.e., one group mentioned transfer of high-level performances from the practice domain to competition, while another group indicated that they needed to focus on the present season instead of what had

happened in previous years) that indicated that some discussion and coordination was still needed to create a single team mission statement.

Following the second round of mission statement creation, the whole team met with the two groups presenting their new mission statement. The spokesperson for each group was encouraged to identify how their group took the key components from the initial mission statements to create the current version and to share the rationale behind including each aspect of the mission. Both groups mentioned that the process of selecting what should be included and should be excluded was difficult, but agreed that forcing prioritization highlighted aspects that were most valued by the team. Again, during this time, the MSCs main role was to be sure no aspects of the mission statement were vague, ambiguous, or unclear, and that all team members understood the two new mission statements. Additionally, the MSC asked probing questions concerning differences and similarities from the two statements to help athletes think about the most important aspects of the statements moving forward.

After all questions had been answered, and any confusion about the revised mission statements had been clarified, the final stage of the process began with all members of the team placed in one group. The team was again instructed to create a new mission statement that incorporated the most important points identified during the second iteration of the process. At this point of the process, it was critical that the MSCs ensured that the group still understood the purpose of the session. Specifically, the team needed to understand that the mission statement was going to help guide team behaviors during the year. It was useful for the consultants to stress that the mission statement should be long enough to convey the three critical questions (i.e., Who are we? Where are we going? How are we going to get there?) but not so long that it was impossible to remember or utilize during the course of the season. Finally, MSCs reminded the

team that during this session all team members should have a voice in the creation of the mission. Just before the task was started, athletes were told that they would be responsible for creating a list of expected behaviors that adhered to the mission statement so coaches and teammates would have a firm understanding of what was expected from each athlete. Therefore, athletes were told that they would be held accountable to the words written, and therefore, should not write anything down they did not believe in or were not willing to commit to during the season. The group was given sufficient time to create a final mission statement (10-20 minutes), and designated one individual to present the mission statement to the coaching staff. During this presentation, team members explained each aspect of the team mission, and coaches provided feedback. Outside of the preliminary discussions that the coaching staff had with the MSCs, this was the first and only input the coaching staff had on the formation of the mission statement during the exercise. Due to the positive MSC-coaching staff relationship, coaches trusted the MSCs to guide the process and empowered their athletes to create a mission statement that would be largely created by the team. On the whole, coaches were pleased with the mission statement and asked for clarification on several aspects of it, with particular attention paid to holding teammates accountable and what this process would entail. Athletes replied that holding each other accountable started by ensuring they were meeting their own responsibilities and then addressing the behaviors that were harming the team or not allowing the team to meet their goals. After this presentation, the team met one last time for 10 minutes to make changes and incorporate coach feedback into the final statement. Once the final changes were made, each member of the team pledged to abide by the mission for the upcoming season and signed the final mission statement as a display of their commitment to the team for the season. For our group, the final mission statement created was:

> "We are fierce (Team name) competitors who act like a family and compete like a team, who are willing to go beyond ALL limits. Together we will hold each other accountable in practice, the classroom, and on the competition floor…..STARTING NOW."

While reading the mission statement outside of its original context may not appear powerful, for the team it was an empowering document. Mullane (2002) stressed that the power in a mission statement is how it is used. In our case, the mission statement represented a variety of aspects that the team valued. First, they wanted to ensure that even in an individual sport like gymnastics, the athletes were competing together for a common goal. Additionally, athletes wanted to ensure that practices that were high-energy and focused were the norm in competition as well. The phrase 'Beyond ALL limits" was a reminder that to achieve the goals they wanted to achieve, they would need to sacrifice and push themselves harder than they had in past seasons. Athletes also wanted to establish a culture of accountability within the team for how individuals behaved in not only the gymnastics domain but also the academic domain. Finally, the phrase 'STARTING NOW' signified that there was nothing they could do about the past years' disappointments, and all energy should be focused on the current season. This focus on the present helped athletes feel as if they were starting new instead of trying to make up for lost opportunities over the past few years and indicated the team was committed to pushing each other in a positive manner and ensuring each practice was the best it could be every time they stepped into the gym.

In addition to the creation of the mission statement, the MSCs led an athlete brain-storming session of gymnastics and non-sport domain behaviors that would indicate an adherence to the mission statement. This brain-storming session was critical for incorporation of the mission statement during the season as it allowed athletes to understand the specific

behaviors required to abide by the mission statement as well as provided the coaches with an understanding of how they would be able to hold athletes accountable during the year. These behaviors focused on improving team culture (i.e., bringing energy and focus to the gym), ensuring commitment to the team (i.e., attending weight lifting sessions, study tables), and keeping lines of communication open between teammates and the coaching staff. Having specific behaviors that directly connected to the mission statement allowed the team to clarify expectations for the year and have a shared vision of how the team could achieve their goals. Finally, following the retreat, the mission statement was posted at multiple locations throughout the gym and locker room, and each athlete received a notecard representation to further reinforce the mission statement throughout the course of the season.

Lessons learned

Overall, the development of the team mission statement was received very positively by both the team and coaching staff. A key consideration for any MSC who is considering running a similar process is to ensure they understand any key issues regarding team climate and group functioning that need to be addressed. In our case, both upperclassman and coaches valued increased collective accountability, and therefore, through guiding questions, we were sure that accountability appeared in the initial and follow-up iterations of the mission statement. It is important to note that an increase in accountability was identified as critical for this specific team's success, but each team will have independent needs that the MSC needs to understand prior to leading a group session.

Another aspect that went well for the mission statement development was each athlete's involvement. For athletes new to the team, they found that their voice was valued and heard early in the season which encouraged participation during the season in both mental training sessions

and other team activities. Additionally, for more experienced athletes, the activity provided an opportunity to lead and help direct the team vision. Following the retreat, several of the athletes indicated that running their own group helped them better understand their role as leaders on the team which they believed helped them throughout the year. Finally, as the process was almost completely athlete driven, we believe there was greater investment than if the coaches or a smaller group of athletes had created the mission. Conceptually, this makes sense as individuals show greater levels of investment and higher motivation when they have greater levels of autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2000).

There were also several aspects that could be improved from our own experiences regarding the team mission statement. First, the mission statement was very well received immediately following the retreat, but it was natural that it moved further from the athletes' minds as the season progressed. Even though the MSC's tried to reinforce it throughout the season, a more systematic approach may have been more effective. For example, at the beginning of each team mental training session, it would have been beneficial to take a few minutes to talk about components embedded within the mission statement such as communication, commitment to being present and focused, and accountability to themselves and their teammates. Another area for improvement, and related to this first point, was that the mission statement was largely reinforced by the MSCs who only were present at practice two days a week. Even though specific behaviors were discussed at the retreat, better instructions for how a coaching staff can reinforce the mission statement would be beneficial as their contact hours with the team are much greater than the MSCs. Athletes created some behavioral guidelines for the mission statement, however greater attention and detail would have been beneficial so that all athletes understand exactly what behaviors were expected during the year

and what, if any, consequences would result if they were not abiding by the mission statement. Finally, in the future it would be beneficial to have a more systematic process of collecting feedback from coaches and athletes immediately following the retreat as well as at the completion of the season to better understand how athletes viewed the process.

As every team is different, several practical considerations should be considered prior to engaging in a mission statement team activity. First, the composition of each team needs to be well-understood. In our activity, there was only one small/moderately sized team where everyone was expected to contribute during the course of the season. However, we know there are some instances where athletes may not be expected to participate (i.e., injured athlete or red shirt freshman) and in these instances, the coaching staff and experienced athletes should be engaged in discussion concerning their preferences of whether every athlete will contribute to the mission statement or if the process should be solely for participating members of the team. Additionally, variations in team size should be taken into account to understand how many iterations are needed. The number of iterations is not necessarily critical, rather, the key consideration is that each group is small enough that each athlete can voice their opinion. Further, the ideal time for each iteration of the mission statement creation will be largely dependent on each group's level of functioning. The authors presented the times that have worked for them in the past with various levels of teams, but each consultant needs to consider their own team's capabilities when leading the exercise. Finally, and most critically, as you begin to think of executing the mission statement exercise, think about how you will incorporate the mission statement with the team throughout the season including the behaviors that will demonstrate athletes are following the mission. If athletes create the mission statement at the beginning of the year but then never see it again, it is unlikely to make a lasting impact.

The mission statement session led by two MSC's provided new team members a voice in shaping the expectations and goals for the upcoming season. A good working rapport with both coaches and athletes was highly beneficial, and a willingness to challenge athletes is critical to ensuring the mission statement fulfills the needs of the team. Ensuring coaches and captains know precisely which behaviors to emphasize in order to support the mission statement during the season is critical as they will typically have more contact with the team than an MSC will have during the season. A mission statement can unite athletes in a common vision, make behaviors needed for success more explicit, and set the foundation for a successful season.

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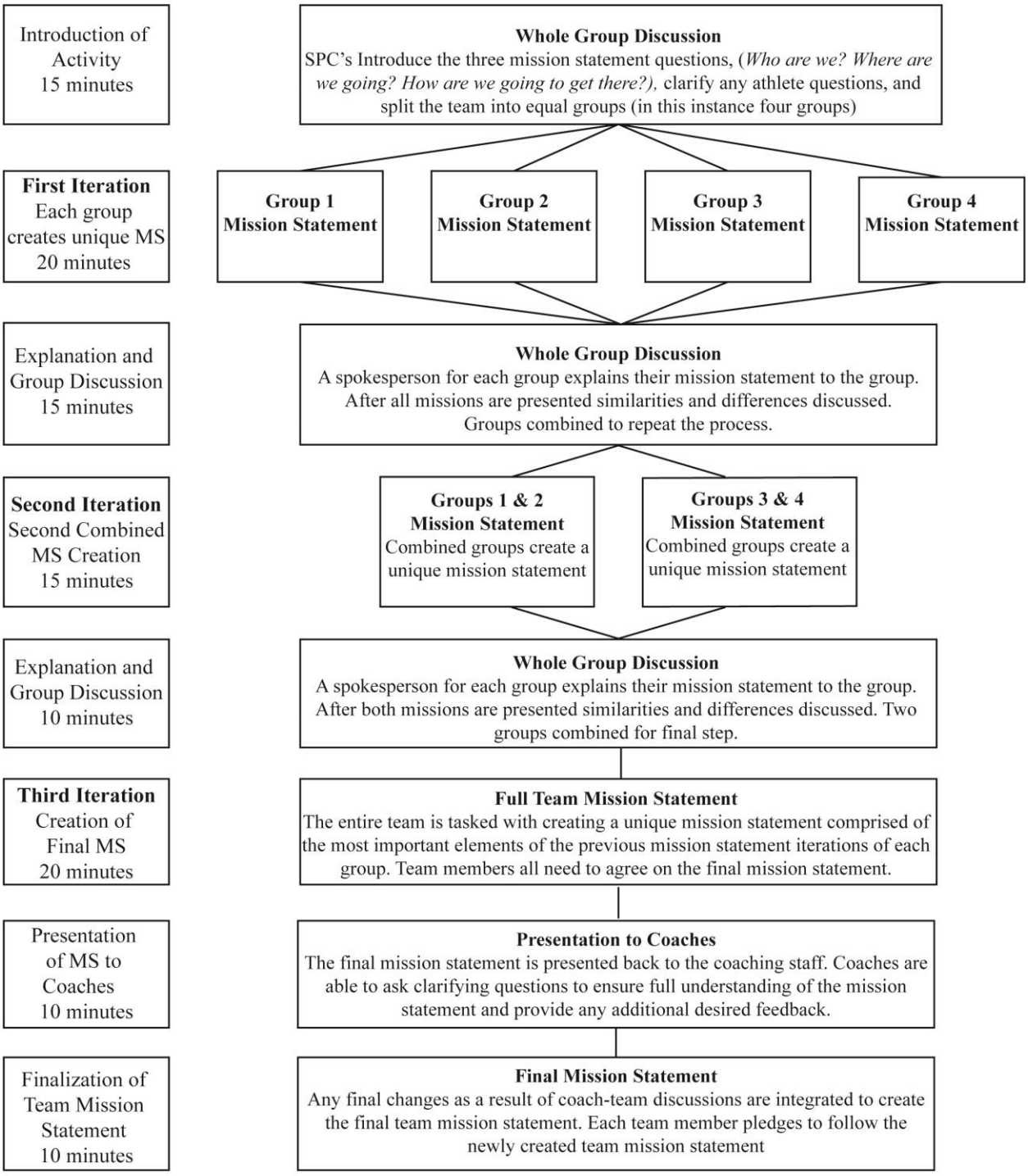
Figure 1.

Visual representation of mission statement group activity with descriptions of each step.