



EPISODE 189 - Culture Eats Strategy for Breakfast with Mark Cascio

- Identify Purpose in Your Program
- Engage Parents in Positive Way
- Develop a Player-Led Culture
- Create a Competitive Environment

Mark Cascio is the head men's basketball coach at Catholic High School in Baton Rouge, LA and the founder of Courtside Consulting.



Tell us about your journey in understanding the importance of culture and leadership.

Started my career focused on Xs & Os and thought that was the most important thing - that you win by out-coaching your opponents tactically.

Progressed from learning about Xs & Os → Running better practices → Building a unified program. Master coaching incorporates culture into all of those aspects.

Culture drives the ability to play hard, smart, and together. If you want teams who share the ball, communicate, and be leaders - the coach needs to build the culture that allows that to happen.

How has your approach to culture evolved in the last few years?

From the beginning I knew I wanted to impact the lives of my players on and off the floor - caring about their education, home life, etc. I struggled to give them grace during basketball.

We always wanted relationships, but now I have a greater emphasis on building better people.

Better people are going to make better basketball players.

What does being a transformational coach mean to you?

Emphasizing relationships, building people, developing character.



JP's Challenge - Take wins / losses out of the equation. What's the overriding goal of the program?

Every member has a meaningful and memorable experience.

What are some things you are doing now to create that meaningful and memorable experience?

We do more one-on-one meetings with players.

We are more proactive partnering with our parents - we are much more transparent.

We are more dedicated to solving the right problem with players.

- What's the obstacle?
- Why is the player falling short of the standard?
- How can I be part of the solution rather than just assigning consequences?

After three consecutive seasons finishing in the Final Four, this past season your team lost in the state quarterfinals. Yet, despite falling short of expectations you had an amazing feeling at the end of the season. How did that happen?

In the locker room after the final game of the year, I always thank our guys for their sacrifice and hard work, for leaving the program better than where they found it. Normally seniors are upset at the end of a season, but even our juniors were crying.

The families, seniors, and players didn't want to leave. A lot of parents commented, "We wish we (the parents) could have done more." It was an amazing feeling in the gym after a playoff loss which is really rare.

How has your culture helped players navigate the high expectations that come from your previous success?

Our communication has improved - coaches and players are on the same page.

Our process and systems really help keep things in perspective.

We talk as little as possible about winning games. We focus on the process of getting better everyday. We keep the emphasis on the journey rather than the outcome.



Winning breeds winning, and breeds confidence. That leads to excitement more than pressure.

What are some things you've done to extend that cultural experience to the parents in your program?

- We invite parents to team meals
- Parents help with travel

We have always included parents in team meals and invited their help with travel. Now we are more proactive and transparent.

For example - Like many coaches I used to dread the parent meeting, but now I see it as an opportunity to talk about our program. We are proud of the work we've done to build it.

At our parent meeting we discuss:

- Playing Time
- Expectations
- Systems of Play

We want the parents' first experience of Catholic High basketball to be a positive one. We want them to walk away feeling like their sons will be treated well and that the coaches are willing to have conversations with them.

What are the most beneficial things you've done in your parent meetings?

We talk about the scarcity of playing time.

We sent an anonymous google form to freshmen parents asking how many minutes their son should play. We totaled the amount and shared it at the meeting to illustrate

- a) There aren't enough minutes in a game to satisfy every parent's desire for playing time
- b) Playing time is a zero-sum game - putting one player in the game means another player comes out

Share the Theme Park Analogy - You can pay admission to get into the theme park, but you have to be a certain height to ride the rides.



For more on this analogy listen to [Episode 134](#): How to create a culture where everything is earned and it feels like family

Be honest with parents. We define four areas of performance:

- Technical
- Tactical
- Physical
- Spiritual

If a player is not playing it's due to a deficiency in one or more of these areas.

We invited the parents into the gym for an offensive clinic to demonstrate how and why we play the way we do. That's just another way we've grown in trying to be transparent.

JP - You have so few issues with playing time because you are organized, you have consistent conversations with players, and you are transparent with parents.

It takes a village to make a successful basketball program - it takes everybody being onboard because when there are parent issues the coach's attention and energy is diverted from making the team better.

How important has the Captains' Council System been for you?

Having a system to develop leaders and make leadership more player-led has had a huge impact on our program.

Putting players in leadership units has fostered closer relationships. They love getting into their units during practice or team meetings.

It allows us to build-in competition between units.

The communication has improved immensely from player-to-player and player-to-coach.

Our program is much more democratic than most basketball programs.

I have a much better pulse of the team because I have opened the door for feedback from our captains. They share genuine opinions rather than what they think I want to hear.



It also gives players a better perspective of the coach's point of view. When they understand how and why decisions are made, and have a role in that process, they are much more likely to be supportive of those decisions with their units.

JP's Captains Council System can be found on CoachTube. Learn how to empower your players to lead, support team standards, and create stronger connections by clicking [HERE](#).

Has there been a change in your leadership that has allowed that player-empowerment to happen?

I have removed myself as the ultimate decision-maker, and allowed players to make important decisions. As people, we are more likely to follow-through on a course of action when we are part of the decision-making process.

What am I willing to let them choose?

That includes them setting and defining standards - such as determining what "on time" means for our morning lifting sessions. Then our job as coaches is to support the standards they set for themselves.

Nate - That process gives the coach permission to enforce those standards in a way that feels more collaborative as you serve them to reach the standards they chose.

We want to be part of the solution rather than just assigning consequences.

What are some things you do to create competitive energy in practice?

Less is More - We shorten practice and practice less often. We prefer shorter, intense practices rather than long sessions.

- Start practices with competition
- Utilize the Quick Set
- Implemented the [Competitive Cauldron](#) (even with skill development)

We've always been a hard-working team, now we are a competitive team.

Competition has helped our engagement and investment in one another, and gives us some data on who is winning and losing in practice.



EPISODE 190 - NO TITLE

- **How to support players caught in the Performance Trap**
- **Coaching behaviors that become obstacles to growth**
- **Great questions to use with athletes**

Prologue - What do you do when a great idea comes your way? Do you have a system to capture, consider, and implement it into your program?

How do you learn? How do you distill the information you consume into practical action that improves your program?

I consider myself a life-long learner.

Being organized and having a system to catalogue information has been crucial. I [BrainToss](#) to capture ideas on my phone (the app automatically sends words, pictures, or audio files to my email).

Ideas are filed in a running log I keep during the year on a google doc (almost like a journal). I reflect on everything relevant to running a basketball program:

- Scheduling
- Off-Season
- Practice Planning
- Skills
- Offense
- Leadership Council
- Competitive Cauldron

I review these notes to plan for the up-coming season.

Instead of you working for the system, make the system work for you.

We use a lot of google docs and sheets to stay organized - that allows us to collect data, capture and organize ideas, and know how to find and share them quickly.

Talk about why you invest so much into finding marginal gains.



One of my major pet peeves is when people say, *"We're going to do it this way because that's the way we've always done it."* That's completely opposite of our approach. We constantly ask ourselves...

Is there a better way?

Our goal is to create every advantage we possibly can, on or off the court.

For example - Our guys weren't drinking enough water. We progressed from...

Shared water bottles → Everyone had their own bottle → Clear bottles (so we could see how much they were drinking) → Requiring players to finish their water bottles before leaving practice → Daily wellness checks (via google form) to gauge mood, hydration, rest, etc.

At the end of the season, our coaching staff critiques all of our systems and processes. We examine EVERYTHING (how we get on the bus, how we travel, how we pack for road games, etc.)

What encouragement would you give to coaches who face resistance to new ideas?

Be convicted.

Don't copycat - you can't just copy and paste from someone else. Make it something you really believe in, and something you really understand. Then it comes from you rather than stealing from another program.

Getting people to buy-in results from customizing the new idea to your current context. Players will buy-in if they know the intent is to benefit them.

Nate - We also need to be willing to acknowledge when ideas don't work, to take ownership, and to not allow our stubbornness to keep us from moving past something that doesn't work.

How do you want to grow your culture, or your own personal leadership, in the coming year?



Personally - I want to improve my tone - it's more about how players read body language and tone than what I actually say. I can come off as more abrasive than I intend to. How can I deliver a message in a way that it will be received?

Culture - Clearly defining roles for players and coaches. Getting coaches in the right role and holding them accountable for our high expectations.

Program Communication - Having honest conversations off the floor with players. Having players give each other feedback between the whistles during the game. We struggle with peer-to-peer feedback (players and coaches).

How has the TOC Mentorship Program impacted you and your program over the past three years?

I quickly realized I have a lot to learn about culture - I had no idea the extent of organization it takes to build culture.

It has completely changed the way that I coach on and off the floor, and how I view coaching in general.

Having someone that is walking the journey with you, understands your program, and can give you solutions to your culture problems is invaluable. Having an expert as a sounding board is invaluable.

So much of what we do in our program has been shaped by JP and my experience in the mentorship program, and I've been fortunate to pass some of those lessons along to the coaches in Courtside.

JP - You are really exceptional at tackling new problems, are willing to try new ideas, and are excellent at executing the plans we develop. When we started working together, your heart was already shifted which made our work together that much more effective.

Describe your experience at the TOC retreat in 2019. What were some of your key takeaways?

There was a lot of information on brain science - how it works, how emotions are generated, etc. That was something I had never been exposed to, and completely changed my thought process. I actually shared a lot of that information at our parent meeting, and that was a game-changer.



We were able to acknowledge that things that are important to me (as a coach) may be very different from what's important to a parent. Our expectations, goals, pain points, etc. will be different because we are looking at the basketball experience from two different lenses.

As TJ Rosene describes - when communicating with parents we are talking about two different people. I'm talking about the player while they are talking about their child.

Meeting other coaches, sharing ideas, and building a community was an amazing experience.

Closing Thoughts

Coaches - Keep in mind why your athletes play your sport. Remember that's somebody's child and our job is to give them the best experience we can regardless of their role. We can always do a better job of creating more fun, and creating a meaningful experience that will impact them for a lifetime.

We've been working on creating this culture and our process for years. It feels like a well-oiled machine now, but it's taken a lot of time and effort to get where we are today.

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