

Model program

Instructor training, customer service essential for success

BY CAREY E. TINKELBERG

While the quality of a Basic Skills program can be measured in many ways, knowledgeable, trained instructors and top-notch customer service are factors that undoubtedly impact the strength and reputation of your program. Below are some tips to consider as the new season begins.

Training your instructors

Your staff has the most direct influence on the experience of your skaters, which comes with a great deal of opportunity and responsibility. An organized training program is a great way to refresh your instructors' knowledge, ensure their understanding of your policies and expectations, and build synergy among the team. Here are tips for designing a training program:

- Start with a fun teambuilding activity.

Not only is training intended to improve your team's teaching skills, it is also a chance to enhance other skills that will make your program stand out, such as communication and teamwork. Try team Jeopardy or sharing your funniest/scariest coaching moments.

- Clarify your policies and expectations.

Highlight changes from previous years and explain why they have been implemented. Field questions now to avoid surprises during the season.

- Use variety. Just as you would expect your instructors to do in their group classes, consider your team's varied learning styles: visual, auditory and tactile. Invite a guest speaker, read through handbooks, do "mock classes" on the ice, or practice lesson planning in small groups. (Keep in mind that the skill-learning that has the most impact involves doing.) Allow your team to role-play and problem-solve rather than just listen. For example, discuss "What do we consider a passing crossover?" or "What steps should we take if someone asks for a private lesson or their money back?"

- Involve your team. If you have instructors who are great with adults or especially talented at leading games, give them the chance to share their knowledge. As a director, it is important to remember that you are just one member of a talented group. Encouraging your staff to share ideas will create a confident, empowered team and the highest quality program possible.

Providing excellent customer service

Customer service includes everything



PHOTO COURTESY OF NORTHFIELD SKATING SCHOOL

The staff at the Northfield Skating School includes, front row (l-r) Melanie Ritz, Kittel Evenson (assistant director), Michaela McLaughlin, Trisha Norberg; middle row (l-r) Gao Yang, Liz Bonawitz (assistant director), Carey Tinkelenberg (director), Kayla Johnson, Jessica Johnson; back row (l-r) Laura Mansell, Kat Zerebiec, Kristen Asp, Gene Uenishi.

from communicating with parents, to the attitude of your instructors, to ensuring that all lessons begin and end on time. To provide excellent service, your instructors should have a solid understanding of what it means in the context of your program and the opportunity to develop their skills. Here are tips for training instructors on customer service.

- Ensure accurate knowledge of your program and policies. Instructors need to be comfortable explaining this information to parents and skaters. Try an informal quiz or role-play challenging situations.

- Stay positive. Instead of "problem-solving," train your instructors to "provide solutions." When interacting with parents, they should always listen first and remain professional. Keep in mind that when communicating face-to-face, body language and tone often speak louder than words. In the long run parents are more likely to remember their experience with your staff members than the result of those interactions.

- Complaints are good. Some complaints circulate among parents and never get back to the skating school staff. When a customer complains to you or an instructor, it should be seen as an opportunity to address their

concern directly and a chance for you to get a "pulse" reading of your program. If you thank customers for sharing their feedback and follow through on their concerns, complaints may turn into future compliments.

- Practice! Communicating with parents can be especially intimidating for new instructors making the transition from skating to coaching. Providing a chance to practice during training and opportunities for parent/coach interaction during the season will increase the skills and confidence of your staff as well as the satisfaction of your skating families. Try hosting an open house or a "Coffee Hour with the Coaches" to encourage interaction and feedback.

- Above all else, your role as director is to lead by example and hold yourself to the highest possible standard of professionalism and service. By setting the bar high for your staff and recognizing their quality work, the rest will follow.

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