

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

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Abstract:

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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 statement with 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

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

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

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

54 Even though few studies in sport have investigated mission statements as the primary
55 concept of interest, mission statements have been cited as a key reason for improved team
56 performance and success. In an overview of effective team building interventions, Yukelson
57 (1997) consistently indicated the positive impact a mission statement or team credo had on team
58 cohesion and performance. Yukelson believed that a mission statement ensured all members
59 were working for the betterment of the team, helped to synchronize efforts within the team, and
60 allowed goal-directed discussion on how the group could work more effectively toward success.

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

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

83 Even though there is initial evidence that a mission statement can be beneficial to teams'
84 performance and cohesion, very little has been written about the process of developing a team
85 mission statement. Within applied practice, outside of a few exceptions (e.g., Dunn & Holt,
86 2004; Pain & Harwood, 2009), very few articles are devoted to describing specific activities
87 designed for team building and increased team functioning. Therefore, the purpose of the
88 manuscript is to outline the authors' experiences leading an activity to develop a season-long
89 mission statement with a collegiate varsity gymnastics team. As context is critical to
90 understanding an exercise (Brawley & Paskevich, 1997), a brief section will describe how MSCs
91 gained entry and developed trust with the coaching staff and team. Next, developing a mission
92 statement is outlined step-by step. Finally, the article concludes with a brief reflection on what
93 went well in the process and what could be enhanced for additional impact.

94 **Gaining Entry and Developing Trust**

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

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

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

123 **Developing a mission statement:**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

275 **Lessons learned**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

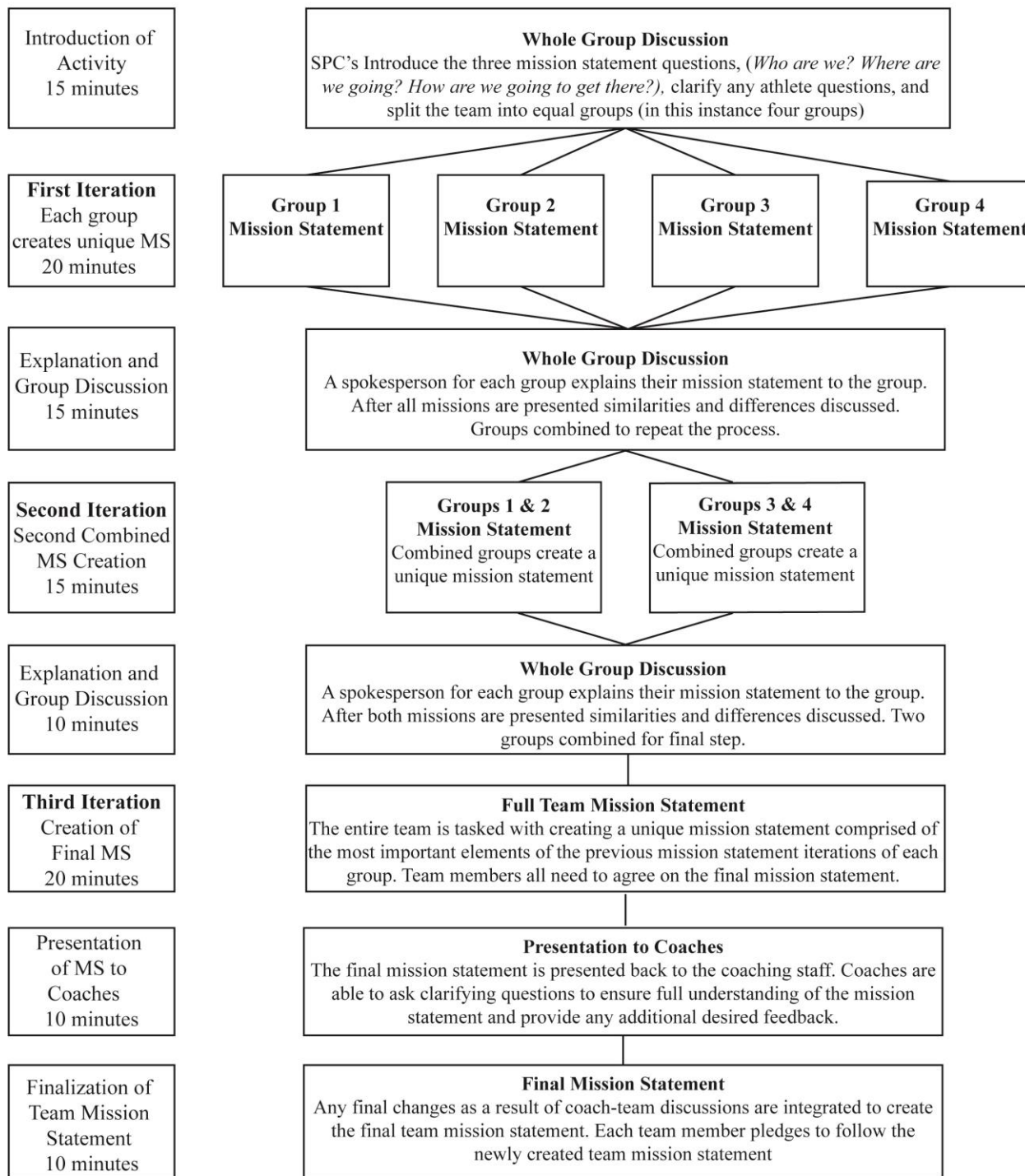
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373 Figure 1.

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



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