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PROTECTING YOUR BACK: WEIGHT ROOM MANAGEMENT

PETER J. TITLEBAUM AND GORDON RACKLEY

Weight room supervision can be a formidable undertaking without the necessary preparations and precautions. Weight room supervisors are much like the Secret Service, that is, no matter what happens, if bad, it is the supervisor's fault. Unsupervised weight rooms should be a thing of the past in these litigious times. A weight room facility is constantly at risk, but just having the weight room staff is no longer enough. Risk management is more important now than at any point in history. There are keys to preventing a nightmare and creating an efficient weight room facility. These keys include a highly trained staff and a thoroughly detailed employee manual designed specifically for the weight room.

Employment Criteria

Prequalification of weight room personnel is vital for success. Each job must be examined and assessed for the skill and qualification level of the employee. The screening and selection of appropriate personnel to work a weight room are vital for its success.

- 1) What education or training qualifications are expected from the employees that are being hired? What training will they have once they are hired?
- 2) What will the responsibilities of each job be?
- 3) What inner qualities would be important for the person to possess?
- 4) What are the current operating procedures and how might they

be altered to enhance operation of the facility?

Selection criteria should consist of:

- 1) minimum of 1 year supervisory experience of a fitness staff in the community, commercial, corporate area of clinical health/fitness facility, or similar;
- 2) knowledge of administrative and personnel management;
- 3) first aid and CPR certification; and
- 4) strength capabilities/testing ability.

When hiring staff for a weight room, pay attention to the physical abilities of candidates. Spotters need to be able to handle large amounts of weight. Setting a minimum weight lifting criteria, such as the 70 pounds set by the United Parcel Service company, is helpful. Those employees who cannot lift the minimum weight would be able to work, but not alone, in the weight room facility. These items cannot be overlooked when hiring your weight room staff.

Hiring a well-trained staff is only as effective as the rules regulating the staff's activities. Accordingly, a manual must be specific to the function of the individual weight room and designed to fit the needs of that operation.

Expectations

The key to a weight room manual is to educate the staff specifically of what is expected of them. The manual and training should provide employees with the guidance and tools to work efficiently. Included should be management training and refresher training with competency testing. A weight room and its staff need to be managed and organized like a business. A clear outline of the roles and responsibilities of

employees needs to be emphasized so that everyone is adequately prepared to handle and respond to the customers' problems in a variety of situations.

The staff must be constantly attentive to the members as they utilize the equipment. Some equipment can be used by members in unintended ways. While on the job, employees are expected to act as constant observers of the people at the machines.

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Personal trainers, who are not your employees, will provide you with another challenge from a liability standpoint. Employees have to be aware that members can be lifting weights that are, at times, of greater mass than the lifters themselves. The potential for unintentional injury by faulty spotting or incorrect form can result in life threatening situations. By emphasizing the importance of a manual specific to the weight room, management shows employees that they have specific roles, responsibilities and rules that must be followed.

Mission Statement

The initial step in establishing an appropriate weight room manual for employees is to define a mission statement. The mission statement is an important component of the manual since it establishes the tone for the environment in which the facility

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should be managed. It is also good to establish an encouraging motto or purpose for employees to follow. It gives them a feeling of a team united with a common goal. One example might be:

Our purpose is to meet the diverse recreational and athletic needs of our members with a broad-based comprehensive program focusing first and foremost on safety. Participants should enjoy the social and health benefits from being active in the programs we offer.

A mission statement needs to be the strong foundation that employees can use as a common goal to strive for and maintain.

Employee Guidelines

Once there is a strong staff and a mission in existence, expectations must be outlined for the staff as individuals and as a group. What are the policies that must be enforced and followed? The staff should be instructed to act as role models for the members. An orientation meeting should be called for the entire staff where a clarification of the shifts is provided and how to appropriately obtain a substitute if unexpected conflicts prevent coming to work. Establishment of a firm routine for arrival and departure from the workplace is intended to prevent tardiness through adherence to stated proceedings. Assigning duties will ensure that all facets of necessary upkeep can be attended to daily. Employees must also be kept aware of any new changes that may affect their positions in the facility, for example, equipment down-time and when equipment is back in operation.

Communication With Staff

The key to making a staff successful is to keep open lines of communication. Employees need to feel that the administrative leaders are approachable. The staff will be responding to the needs and immediate concerns of the most vital piece of any weight room, the members.

Therefore, it is necessary to establish a system of feedback from employees. The main ingredient to opening these lines of communication is the support of the staff by the management. The staff must feel that they have the trust, respect and positive reinforcement of their employers.

Periodic performance reviews demonstrate continued interest in the quality of the employees' work and skill development. Most of all, responding to employees' concerns and suggestions will encourage a positive work environment.

Communicating With Members

Not only is communication within the staff important, but it is also necessary to communicate with the members. A suggested avenue to open lines of communication is to use two bulletin boards. One of the bulletin boards should be located outside the weight room and used to post the schedule of the facility. It should be easily accessible to the passerby and should provide the members with a thorough report of the facility's offerings.

The second bulletin board should be placed within the actual weight room and used to relay information on how to effectively use the equipment to maximize results. Charts that will convert a chosen weight (for example, one's personal best weight from kilograms to pounds or vice versa) and give percentages of this chosen weight will further help to create an efficient weight room. This form of communication will demonstrate the desire of the staff to provide members with efficient service as well as including the members in the operation of the weight room.

Another avenue that might possibly open up communication with members is the posting of sample workouts. These samples provide guidelines for members. Sample workouts can act as motivators to help members stay with a regular exercise regimen as well as educating them on their progress. The additional

attention to the personal success of the member further demonstrates the staff's desire to accommodate its patrons. Posting charts around the room specific to the equipment can be used to illustrate how to use the equipment and help to alleviate chance of injury due to improper use. Another consideration would be personal tracking charts for members so they can monitor progress over time. Files can be kept in a central location for access by members or staff. The staff can also provide a comment box where membership can give feedback. These comments can be placed on the membership board with replies to these comments.

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Managing A Quality Facility

With the staff and administration now a cohesive unit, the focus must turn to the managing of the facility and the guarantee of quality performance for the members. No facility will prosper without dedicated members, and the only way to promote this is to display care and upkeep of the facility and machinery. Daily cleanliness is a **must**, as is ensuring the proper upkeep of machines.

A checklist used by both supervisors and employees, attended twice daily, will ease this procedure. Not only will it guarantee a clean and well-managed weight room, but it should enable intervention before any severe problems in the machinery result. A daily checklist, if used properly, should minimize the amount of external service on the equipment and thereby reduce costs. This checklist should include: machines, wires, cables, connections and the intricate motions and mechanisms

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of every piece of equipment in your weight room. Making sure the proper tensions on cables are adhered to, as well as routine lubrication of all the machines, is necessary.

The key to daily upkeep is **cleanliness**. No member will use a facility if he or she fears it to be a health hazard. A way to guarantee that employees are properly reporting the daily cleaning of machines is to keep an accurate record of used supplies. Perhaps a specified allotment of supplies per machine (or set of machines) will prompt employees to dedicate more time to the cleaning of the equipment. Another suggestion is to make sure paper towels and spray water bottles are available for the members to wipe down equipment if they choose. This availability of supplies encourages the members to take an active role in the facility as well as demonstrating the staff's devotion to maintaining a quality environment.

Cleaning not only includes the upholstery and seats, but even the nuts and bolts holding the machines together. Cleaning of the paint, the seats and the pads should be emphasized. Extra pads should be readily available if old ones show even a trace of wear. Running histories on each machine should be kept for reference if problems arise. In an era when everyone has a lawyer prepared to sue, daily checks, recorded histories and cleaning will hopefully prevent any dangerous situations or accidents due to faulty machinery.

In addition to paying attention to the cleanliness and upkeep of the equipment, it is also essential that the staff is properly and accurately trained in the safe use of all machinery and free weights. Each member on the staff should be knowledgeable on the form and function of each piece of equipment and should be able to demonstrate its proper use. The staff should be able to understand and answer questions as to the equipment and which group of muscles it targets as well as how to adjust the seat and weight resistance for the user. In conjunction with an understanding

of their functions, a staff member should be able to act as the necessary spotter during free weight usage and to make sure, if necessary, that the proper collars are being used.

Accidents

An accident or a health complaint by a member must be copiously and accurately documented. No complaint should be seen as trivial or insignificant. Even a minor cut should be fully documented and universal blood procedures followed. The who, what, where, when and why of every problem should be written out completely and submitted immediately to the administration. These reports must be filled out objectively with no diagnosis attached to them.

No complaint should be seen as trivial or insignificant.

Updated and well-supplied first aid kits need to be available and within reach of every individual certified to perform such functions. The job outlines should establish who can and will attend to injuries. Problems can arise if an unqualified individual performs a first aid procedure. All these guidelines are extremely important. Little items may become legal issues when overlooked. An area of the incident report should be devoted to the follow-up action taken after an incident. The report's effectiveness is enhanced by stipulating the outcome. It presents a personal, yet professional, side of the business to the clientele.

Member Guidelines

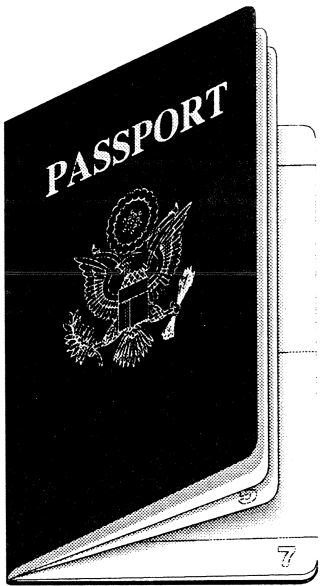
With a staff managing a well-equipped and well-maintained facility, guidelines for the members must now be established. Rules need to be specific and avoid loopholes. The rules must be reviewed with membership on a regular basis, (e.g., renewal time, fitness evaluation). Attire codes for members must be determined. Inappropriate attire can

cause accidental injury. What personal equipment and belongings can and cannot be brought within the various divisions of the facility should be emphasized. Will the facility limit various areas to certain ages? It is suggested a minimum age be established for using the more difficult and strenuous machinery. Well-defined expectations will result in proper treatment of the facility by the members. To make this work, the staff must enforce these rules to further avoid accidents and possible legal problems.

Conclusion

No longer is it a question of do you need a weight room manual! The time has come for each recreational facility to outline its expectations and procedures. A facility needs to create a stable environment and assure safety. If not, there are accidents waiting to happen—accidents that could happen to you!

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