

What Do I Do With These Guys for an Hour and a Half?

Hit the Ground Running! A Guide to Planning Odyssey Meetings

A common complaint coaches have regarding their teams sounds like this:
"All they do is goof around at meetings."

If this sounds familiar, read on.

Left to their own devices, it is unlikely that 5, 6, or 7 elementary, middle or high school students will accomplish much at an Odyssey meeting. Making the most out of that hour and a half depends on how you structure it. Here are some suggestions.

Primary Teams (kindergarten through grade 2)

Elementary school teachers know that young children have teeny weenie little attention spans. Plan your meetings so that from the moment they begin, you have more (fun) activities than you need so that there is little or no "down" time.

TIPS:

- Allow 10-15 minutes per activity. Remember that attention span.
- Start with Brainstorming, and wait until they're really worked up before you work on the long term problem.
- Keep the meetings fairly short, especially at the beginning.
- Try to end each meeting with a silly, just-for-fun, activity that has nothing to do with the long term problem. This way they will leave the meeting feeling great about Odyssey and about their team. (That's why they joined Odyssey, after all.)
- Above all, remember that these are kids. Kids do not do things the way grown-ups do. That's why we don't call them "adults."

Division I Teams (up through grade 5)

The biggest difference between Primary Teams and Division I Teams is the "Competition Factor." Now that they've hit the big leagues, there are real, honest-to-goodness" deadlines and the work they do will be judged. So: Competition + Deadlines + Judges = BIG TIME STRESS for some kids. The key with these kids is Perspective. As a coach, your biggest job is to help the kids keep their perspective. After all, this is supposed to be FUN. The world is not going to end if things aren't letter perfect. Whatever they create will probably not really look like they envisioned it and this will disappoint some kids. If you have ever worked with perfectionists (and there are a lot of them in Odyssey), you know that they are never satisfied with their creations. Your job is to help them maintain the playfulness and fun that is so important in Odyssey.

TIPS:

- Plan your meetings much as you would for Primary Teams. The attention spans are only marginally longer.
- De-emphasize the competitive aspect of the program, and don't forget the fun.
- Work on team-building by going on field trips, having pizza together, choosing an item for team identity (a team hat, pin, etc.)
- As the Regional Meet approaches, try to exude confidence that everything will be done in time, they will be wonderful, etc.
- Communicate with the parents. They can be invaluable, but they can't read your mind. Tell them what you need.
- Meetings should be tightly structured so that time is not wasted.
- Make a special effort to draw out the strengths of the quieter kids, and insist that everyone is involved and mutually respected.

- The last two weeks before the Regional Meet can be very intense. Help them relax by holding a dress rehearsal for their parents followed by a celebration. Tell them they're wonderful. Let the inconsequential stuff go – it's not important.
- Above all – Never let them see you sweat!

Division II Teams (grades 6-8, with an occasional younger child)

Take all of the above, add a liberal dose of hormones, and a couple of broken hearts, and you have Division II in a nutshell. The key term to keep in mind that applies to nearly all Division II teams is **lack of focus**. These kids tend to “take the long way” to the Regional Meet, but they do get there eventually. No matter how well you plan your meetings, they probably won't accomplish anywhere near what you would have liked them to. That's OK, because what *they* can do that the younger teams can't is *punt*. When the clock on the scoreboard is about to run out of time, they come to life and put together truly astonishing things. So the most important thing for you to do as coach is relax, buy stock in a pizza company, and keep the aspirin handy.

TIPS:

- If you want to get a lot accomplished at the meetings, keep them short, just like Primary.
- To keep conflicts to a minimum, consider dividing the team into specialized work groups for some meetings. These “sub-groups” meet to work on one specific thing, such as costumes or script development.
- Team-building is a must – get away from the usual meeting place once in a while. Go somewhere completely different.
- Read them the “Coaches' Bill of Rights” and have the team write its own Bill. Then *enforce it*.
- If you coached them when they were younger, forget how dedicated and excited they were. These are different kids now, with different priorities. Recognizing that and accepting it are the keys to long life and happiness as a Division II coach. (They still get excited – just not about anything *you* say or do.)

Division III Teams (grades 9-12, with an occasional younger child)

In Odyssey, there is a sort of unofficial motto: “We Can Do It All Ourselves.” The “We” refers, of course, to the kids (not the coaches or parents). When dealing with Division III teams, the coach's role is far less evident than with younger teams. By the time they are in high school, we truly do want the kids doing every facet of the problem, *as well as the organizational tasks*, themselves. The more they accept ownership of the problem, the better. At this age our kids are certainly capable of solving the problems themselves, but organizing the team into a cohesive unit is another matter. Learning when to lead, when to follow, when to delegate, and when to accept the authority of a peer is difficult work – adult work. They aren't quite there yet, and that is where you, the coach, come in. Your job is to facilitate the team's efforts. The idea is to intervene in the process as little as feasible, leaving every possible decision up to the team.

TIPS:

- Remember how very different a ninth grader is from a twelfth grader. Don't expect the same level of ability and commitment from all members of the team. It's called “diversity” and it really does make the team more interesting.
- These kids simply do not have the same amount of time to devote to Odyssey that they did when they were younger. Allow for that.
- Things that are important in a job – like being on time, being prepared, etc. – are things you should gently emphasize. If Odyssey is helping to prepare them for the real world, let's get them used to the real world's expectations.
- Be a good role model. There are far too few of these around. Any adult who is willing to spend this much time working with kids sets a wonderful example.
- Have them set their own agenda for meeting their own deadlines and delegating their own responsibilities. Then just sit back and see how they handle it. Avoid the temptation to make their problems your problems.
- Don't forget to enjoy them. Marvel at their intelligence, wit, maturity and unlimited potential.