

PLAYING FAIR

Jane E. Barnes
Meredith College

The new Athletic Director at Southern State University has just instituted a new performance management system for the intercollegiate coaches that is based on setting mutual goals around objective measures, and 360-degree feedback from the athletes. The coach's pay increase will be determined by whether he or she met the goals and the athletes' satisfaction with the coach.

Scott Nowling, who has been the head soccer coach at SSU for ten years, has a meeting with the AD to discuss his performance for the past year. Scott has turned the soccer team around during his tenure, bringing it from the doormat of the conference to a top 25 national ranking; he is a highly motivational coach and his teams routinely have the highest GPA on campus. Scott is stunned to learn from his AD that his performance has been rated as "met expectations" and he would not receive any pay increase. Subsequent to the performance review, Scott learns that the positions of his administrative assistant and one of his assistants have been removed. Scott starts to wonder whether his job at SSU is safe.

INTRODUCTION

Head soccer coach Scott Nowling was beaming with confidence as he walked towards Athletic Director David Frazier's office. For the first time in his ten years at Southern State University, the pay of the athletic coaches was going to be linked to their performance. Scott was on his way to have his annual performance review, and he was expecting good news since he and his team had exceeded the goals that had been set for them that year.

SCOTT NOWLING

Scott Nowling had come to Southern State University (SSU) after a stint at East Coast College (ECC), Scott's alma mater, which was a small school in a much less prestigious athletic conference. Scott had been an all-American midfielder at ECC, stayed on as an assistant while he got his master's degree, and took over the program when the head coach suddenly retired. During his six years as head coach of ECC, he led the team to four conference championships and their first appearance in the NCAA tournament. Overall, his teams had won more than 80% of their matches, and his team developed a reputation as one that could play with the "big boys."

When the head coaching position at SSU opened, the then-athletic director of SSU had approached Scott about the job. Despite the lure of coaching at the flagship state institution, the decision to leave ECC was not an easy one. He knew there would be much more pressure to win at SSU, the competition would be a lot tougher, and the bureaucracy at the larger university was potentially daunting. In addition, SSU was the soccer doormat of their athletic conference, and the sport itself was considered one of those “lesser” sports in a conference dominated by national powerhouses in football and basketball. At ECC, Scott was known all over campus and soccer was king; at SSU, would he be just another face in the crowd?

And there also was his wife to consider. Andrea was the head lacrosse coach at ECC and her career was on the rise as well. Taking the job at SSU would mean that her career would be stalled as it was doubtful she would be able to find a head coaching job in the area. On the other hand, Scott’s salary at SSU would be more than both of them made combined at ECC, and they had been talking about starting a family. Despite his misgivings, the opportunity to coach at the much larger state school was too much for Scott to pass up. He had been successful at ECC, and if he could turn around the soccer program at SSU, this could mean even better opportunities in the future.

LIFE AT SOUTHERN STATE UNIVERSITY—2001-2010

When Scott arrived at Southern State, the then-athletic director assured him that SSU was dedicated to building a competitive soccer team. A new soccer field had just been installed, there were new locker rooms, and Scott was given the personnel he requested to support the team. By most measures, Scott’s teams were very successful. After ten years, he was the winningest soccer coach in SSU’s history, and had taken the team to five straight NCAA appearances, although they had never advanced beyond the first round. They were also no longer the doormat of the conference; by 2010, his team was firmly in the middle of the pack—not quite the top tier, but certainly very respectable. In addition, his team was poised to finally break into the top 25 national ranking—something that had never been achieved.

Although the wins were important, Scott was just as proud of developing his students. His teams routinely had the highest GPA of any sports team on campus, and they also graduated on time. Scott was proud of these accomplishments as well as the fact that he had started to gain some recognition for his motivational techniques and had been invited to lecture at soccer camps and conferences on the topic.

Scott also had a good relationship with the athletic director, although he felt that the performance reviews—such as they were—definitely needed improvement.

The performance management system at SSU was perfunctory at best. Each year, at the end of the season, the AD would hand Scott a copy of his appraisal—a one page document with a list of categories encompassing topics from the athletic performance of the team to the ability to communicate with administrators. Each topic was ranked from one (poor) to five (outstanding), and every year Scott's appraisal had the "five" circled by every category. There was nothing written on the appraisal and, much to Scott's frustration, there was absolutely no feedback other than, "Keep up the good work!"

Another frustration was that the team's success and his "outstanding" performance ratings were not tied to any salary increase. Scott occasionally received a cost of living adjustment. But instead of any performance-based salary increase, the AD would give Scott a year-end bonus that was not based on any meaningful measurement, as far as Scott could tell.

During the 2009-10 academic year, rumors of the AD's departure began, and in mid-2010, the old AD was replaced by David Frazier, who came to SSU with a reputation as a top-notch administrator. In Frazier's first meeting with the coaches, Scott was encouraged to hear him state that he would be instituting a pay-for-performance system. Starting with this academic year, the coaches would be measured on specific goals and objectives that were to be jointly determined.

LIFE AT SOUTHERN STATE UNIVERSITY—2010-2011

Soon after the initial coaches meeting, Scott met with David in his office to discuss his goals for the upcoming year. "This is going to be a joint goal-setting exercise," David started. "This is part of a larger 360-degree feedback system I want to implement. In addition to my evaluation of your performance, you will be evaluating the administration's performance. Plus, although this has only been tried at a few schools, we are going to ask your athletes to rate your performance as a coach. At the end of the year we will evaluate how you did based on the goals we are going to set and your pay increase will be based in large measure on that success, plus the feedback from your athletes."

"That sounds great," Scott replied, thinking of the hard work he put in to developing his athletes, and the good rapport he had with them. "Let's get started!"

David explained that the goals would be around three main criteria: where the team finished in the conference; their success in the NCAA tournament; and the GPA of the team. Scott suggested, and David agreed, that finishing fifth out of the ten teams in the conference would be a difficult goal—having finished sixth the last two seasons—but one he was willing to strive for. They also agreed that winning in the first round of the NCAA tournament—something the soccer team had never done—

would be a stretch goal. When it came time to discuss GPA, David stopped Scott before he could say anything. “For this goal,” he said, “I have a uniform policy for all of my coaches: their teams must have a 3.0 average.” “That’s fine with me,” Scott replied, knowing that his team had routinely been well above that mark. As the meeting concluded, Scott asked if he could get a copy of what had been agreed; David told Scott that he would get him his goals in writing within the next couple of weeks. A few weeks passed and Scott still had not received any documentation on what they had agreed to. The AD put him off a couple of times and, once the soccer season started, Scott had completely forgotten about that piece of paper.

With soccer season in full operation, Scott had little time to notice other goings on at the school. He had heard that the long-time tennis and softball coaches had been “forced out” and replaced with some of Frazier’s former coaches. *Not happening to me*, Scott thought at the time. *Their performances were marginal at best and they probably needed to go.*

THE PERFORMANCE REVIEW

Scott was confident as he entered the AD’s office. The soccer team had had its best year ever, and Scott felt he had exceeded the goals that had been set. Furthermore, in one of his press releases, Frazier had announced that his goal was to have every SSU team ranked in the top 25 nationally. Scott’s team had done just that—for the first time, the soccer team cracked the top 25, ending the season ranked 25th in the country. Based on this performance, he felt bold enough that he was going to ask not only for a significant pay increase, but also a multi-year contract.

The first words out of Frazier’s mouth were somewhat disconcerting. “This was difficult for me,” he said as he handed Scott his review. “I really struggled with your review.” Scott was stunned by these words, and shocked when he glanced down at the paper in front of him. In the three areas he was ranked as “Met Expectations.” “I’m sorry,” Frazier stated, “but this average performance results in no pay increase.” Scott recovered from his initial shock and said, “I don’t understand these ratings. My team finished fourth in the conference, even though my goal was to finish fifth. We made it through the first round of the NCAA tournament for the first time. And, my team’s GPA was 3.4, the best of any team on campus. Plus, we’ve received our first top 25 ranking. I’m struggling to see how this is just average performance.”

“Well,” David started, “the NCAA tournament win was the goal that was set, so you did meet expectations. Finishing fourth instead of fifth is not that much of a difference. And you also met expectations for GPA. Finishing in the top 25, while a great achievement, was not one of your goals for this year.”

“Wait,” Scott said, confused and still shaken, “the goal for GPA was 3.0. You said that that was the goal for all the athletic teams this year. My team far exceeded that goal. And, finishing fourth in the conference is no small achievement—it’s higher than any soccer team here has ever finished!”

“We could argue about fourth or fifth all day. In my opinion you met expectations on that goal. But I have my notes right here on the GPA,” he said, shuffling some papers, “and I’ve clearly written down that your goal was 3.4.”

Scott was almost too stunned to speak. “My recollection was that it was 3.0,” he said, thinking that he should have pursued getting the goals in writing. “And what about the feedback from the students—that 360-degree thing? Wasn’t that supposed to be a factor?”

“That process didn’t work as well as we had liked,” Frazier replied. “Maybe next year we’ll have a better process.”

“So, no pay raise at all? That seems a bit unreasonable to me. I’m one of the lowest paid coaches in the conference. I’m one of the few without a multi-year contract. I’ve changed the profile of the soccer program at SSU so that now we’re getting national recognition. And, with a top 25 finish, we’ve met one of your stated objectives. I’m really struggling with how this equates to just average performance and no pay increase. Does this mean no bonus, either?”

“That’s exactly what it means,” Frazier replied, his voice growing colder. “I’m not sure there is anything more to discuss. I’m sorry you’re disappointed. The soccer team is doing well; I think they can do better. You’ll have to excuse me, but I have to be running to another meeting.” With that, Frazier stood up, indicating that the performance review was over. Scott turned numbly toward the door and walked out of the room in silence.

Walking back to his office, he bumped into the new softball coach, Martina Smith. “How’s it going, Scott?” she asked.

“You had your performance review with David already, didn’t you?” Scott asked. “How’d it go?”

“It was great! He cut me a little slack because it was my first year here, so I got a nice raise even though technically I didn’t meet all those silly goals and objectives. How can I be held accountable for the athlete’s grades, after all? And how are they supposed to get a 3.0 with all the travelling and games? I think what helped me, though, was the athletes’ feedback on me as a coach. Of course, I had a little discussion with them about the number of suicide sprints they’d be doing if I didn’t

get a lot of smiley faces! Wonder if that might have made a difference?" she said, winking as she laughed. "You're gonna do fine, given how well your team did this year."

"Yea, thanks," Scott mumbled as he headed to his office. Glancing down at his desk, he saw an envelope marked "Confidential" in bold red letters. Opening the letter, he saw it was from David Frazier. "Due to budget constraints," the letter stated, "the following positions on your staff will be eliminated effective January 1, 2012: Administrative Assistant and one assistant coaching position."

So, now I have to do more with less? Scott thought. I'm too exhausted and angry to get anything done today. I'm heading home.

As he got in his car and started the drive toward home, he wondered how he could break this news to Andrea. They had planned a weekend getaway from their three boys to celebrate. He couldn't help comparing his experience to that of Martina's, one of Frazier's hires. *I was on top of the world this morning, he thought, now I'm wondering if the AD is out to get me. Should I be looking for another job? What exactly went wrong here?*