

INSTITUTIONAL COURAGE IN SPORTS

**This sheet is for:**

This sheet is for advocates to better understand the history of ignoring reports of abuse in sport and the lack of institutional courage in the sporting world.

How advocates can use this:

Advocates can use this sheet to better understand some of the power and control dynamics at play in sports ecosystems. This can help advocates better understand the histories of ignoring abuse in sports and how this impacts athlete survivors, and makes reporting abuse even more difficult.

Institutional Courage

Institutional Courage is “an institution’s commitment to seek the truth and engage in moral action, despite unpleasantness, risk, and short-term cost. It is a pledge to protect and care for those who depend on the institution. It is a compass oriented to the common good of individuals, institutions, and the world. It is a force that transforms institutions into more accountable, equitable, effective places for everyone.”¹

Institutional Cowardice

Institutional Cowardice is an institution’s failure to take necessary action, often out of fear of repercussions, which exacerbates betrayal and harm. It can manifest as individuals hiding behind rules, a deliberate “calculated inaction,” or a refusal to address issues, even when they are aware of them. This concept is the opposite of institutional courage, which involves an institution taking responsibility, transparency, and support for those it has harmed.²

Institutional Betrayal

Institutional Betrayal is where an institution “is harming those dependent on the institution. [This includes] the failure to prevent or respond supportively to wrongdoings within the institution when there is a reasonable expectation of protection. The harm of institutional betrayal is both pragmatic and psychological.”³

In sports, there is a long and storied history of institutional betrayal at the highest levels of society—from International Federations of Sport, to the US Federal Bureau of Investigation, to many colleges and universities. Common themes are ignoring abuse and silencing survivors. Driven by fears of liability and lawsuits, many advisors in these situations encourage the institution to never admit to any wrongdoing. But this stance is the exact opposite of what survivors often need in these situations: a meaningful apology and commitment to act to ensure it does not happen again.

¹ <https://www.institutionalcourage.org/>; Adams-Clark, A. A., Barnes, M. L., Lind, M. N., Smidt, A., & Freyd, J. J. (2024). Institutional courage attenuates the association between institutional betrayal and trauma symptoms among campus sexual assault survivors. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0001812>

² Brown, Laura. (2020). Institutional Cowardice: A Powerful, Often Invisible Manifestation of Institutional Betrayal. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*. 22. 1-8. 10.1080/15299732.2020.1801307.

³ Smith, C.P. & Freyd, J.J. (2014). Institutional betrayal. *American Psychologist*, 69, 575-587. And see <https://dynamic.uoregon.edu/jjf/institutionalbetrayal/>

What institutions can do:

If you are working with institutions that have a responsibility and role in protecting the survivor(s) you are working with, but have failed to do so, there are several things you can do as an advocate to assist them in moving away from institutional cowardice and betrayal, and towards institutional courage.

Having conversations around and encouraging these institutions to:

- 01 Commit to seek truth and engage in moral action, despite unpleasantness, risk, and short-term cost.
- 02 Comply with civil rights laws and go beyond mere compliance; beware of oversensitive/defensive risk management.
- 03 Educate the institutional community (especially leadership).
- 04 Add checks and balances to the power structure and diffuse highly dependent relationships.
- 05 Respond well to victim disclosures (and create a trauma-informed reporting policy).
- 06 Bear witness, be accountable, apologize.
- 07 Cherish the whistleblowers; cherish the truth tellers.
- 08 Conduct scientifically sound anonymous surveys.
- 09 Regularly engage in self-study.
- 10 Be transparent about data and policy.
- 11 Use the organization to address the societal problem.
- 12 Commit ongoing resources to numbers 1 through 11.

From Center for Institutional Courage,
<https://www.institutionalcourage.org/resources-for-changemakers>

If you have questions on how to build trauma-informed, institutionally courageous sports organizations, reach out to The Assist at info@theathletesurvivorsassist.org.