



Developing Effective Communication as a Coach

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Effective communication is about sharing information and is a critical skill for a coach's and a team's success. This article provides strategies coaches can implement to develop an effective communication system. Coaches who build strong relationships with athletes and encourage athletes to share information in an open and honest manner are likely to create a supportive team environment where athletes feel valued and respected. Such an environment makes providing and receiving feedback easier. This article provides information and tips on how to send and receive messages effectively in order to enhance individual and team performance.

Target audience: coaches

The Basics

Effective communication is a crucial part of being a successful coach. Without this skill, coaches struggle to build relationships with athletes or provide effective feedback that will help athletes improve. In addition, technical and tactical knowledge is wasted if it cannot be shared with others for the good of the team. A coach who can communicate in an open and honest way will help all team members feel valued and respected, while a coach who struggles to send and receive messages appropriately can end up with a team that is frustrated, disillusioned, and that has bad chemistry.

Like all skills, communication can be improved with practice, and having a well thought out communication system is a good start toward having a successful season on and off the field. By keeping just a few communication tips in mind, coaches can begin to develop a style of communication that

will benefit both the coaches themselves and their teams as a whole.

All communication can be broken down into two parts: sending a message and receiving a message. Both are equally important, and though it may seem like getting your point across to the team is your primary goal, helping an athlete feel listened to will go a long way in building the type of positive relationships that create successful teams.

Sending Messages

There are several important components to getting your point across effectively. To start, coaches should craft their message. It is important that the message itself is well thought-out and can be delivered in a concise and understandable way. Next, coaches need to know the audience. Different people communicate differently and it is the coach's job to adapt to each individual. Finally, coaches must be honest. If coaches want their athletes to take what they say seriously, it is

important that they know the coaches mean what they are saying.

Craft Your Message

Coaches who take the time to think through what they are going to say are more effective communicators than those who just say things as they pop into their heads. As such, coaches should take a moment to craft the message they are about to send, as it is well worth the time. First, it is important to think about whether or not what a coach plans to say is consistent with his/her overall goal, and whether or not it can be communicated concisely. Although it may be tempting to react to a situation immediately as it unfolds, coaches may want to consider allowing themselves time to manage their emotions and clarify a message to avoid misspeaking and having to revise messages later. In addition, messages that are convoluted and unclear are unlikely to have the desired impact.

Context is also critical for crafting a message and sometimes knowing when to say something is just as important as knowing what to say. Realizing that a message will have a different impact in an office than it will on the field is important. Coaches should keep in mind that athletes in high stress situations take in less information than normal, so a message sent during a game should be more concise than a message sent during practice or in a side conversation later on. For example, at half-time, coaches should give each athlete one or two tasks to focus on in the second half rather than giving the whole team a list of things to work on. Keeping the message short

and concise allows athletes to process the information more effectively.

Once the message has been crafted, do not be afraid to repeat yourself. Repeating information and using different methods to deliver a message are important if coaches want athletes to understand it. Coaches should tell them more than once and repeat the main components of the message regularly. When appropriate, coaches can show them what they are saying and then have athletes replicate it to ensure that the message was interpreted correctly.

Know the Audience

No matter how well-crafted a message is, each individual will understand it slightly differently. Coaches who take an interest in developing relationships with athletes will be able to communicate better with them and understand how they receive information. This allows coaches to shape and time these message so that it can have the greatest impact. Although we often think it should be up to the athletes to adapt to the coach, communication is a two way process and you can save yourself energy by taking your audience into account. For example, Sir Alex Ferguson, a legendary soccer coach, was seen rehearsing how he was going to yell at a player. He knew that this player reacted better to this form of feedback and wanted to make sure that he crafted his message the right way for that particular player.

Be Honest

Be honest with athletes and tell them the truth. Honest communication builds

a trusting environment and can enhance the coach's effectiveness. This may be especially true in situations of conflict. When confronting athletes, make sure that you are managing your emotions so that they do not disrupt the information delivery. To do this, focus on the content of the message rather than the individual, and make it specific and concise. Use "I" statements rather than "you" for a more supportive tone. Remember, athletes receive messages differently and you may need to adjust your language and repeat yourself. Coaches must be willing to be direct and specific when sharing information. Athletes need usable and specific information to interpret the message correctly. Keeping the athlete's age in mind is important. If you are speaking to a younger athlete, think about addressing the situation in a way that is understandable and not degrading. You want athletes to stay interested in what you are saying. Use emotion when communicating with athletes. Messages attached to emotional content have a greater effect on receivers. However, try not to draw on emotional content too often; use it when appropriate and when it feels right for you and your team.

Do not confuse telling the truth with providing information in a harsh manner. It does not require any skill to be mean. Use supportive language to build your athletes up rather than tear them down during conversations. As previously mentioned, athletes want to feel respected and valued. Keep this in mind when choosing your words and tone to deliver information.

Receiving Messages

Communication is a two way process, and the information you can gain from

being able to listen to and understand your team effectively is highly valuable. There are important factors to consider when receiving a message. First, seek to understand. Second, listen actively. Listening does not just mean being quiet, and it is good to ask for clarification so that you can understand.

Seek to Understand

There is a difference between hearing and listening. The goal of listening is not just to have the other person finish talking so that you can start again. Allow what the person is saying to impact you. Give your athletes a supportive space to express feelings and opinions. Providing a comfortable atmosphere for open communication improves relationships; athletes feel important to the team process. Encourage athletes to speak with one another and to you with comments or concerns and follow up after your conversations to demonstrate that you heard and care about the athlete. Acknowledge and applaud effective communication- talking and listening- when you see it. Furthermore, listening to your athletes models ideal communication behavior. If you give them time and space, they will do the same for you.

Listen Actively

When receiving information, it is most effective to actively listen to the person talking. Listen to the information to understand rather than to reply, indicate that you are following the message, and ask questions to clarify. Paraphrase what the person told you and reflect the person's feelings to be sure that you understand. Another critical part of

listening is to be flexible. Each person has a different way of talking and delivering information. Do your best to listen for the content of the message and be honest if you do not understand. Some times are better for more drawn out conversations than other times. If you anticipate that a conversation may be too draining in a certain moment or setting, set up a more appropriate time to talk.

Modeling and Feedback

In addition to sending and receiving messages, there are some other factors that should be considered as parts of being an effective communicator. Modeling a good communication style is important for team chemistry, and good communication starts with the coach.

Model

As with other hierarchical roles, coaches cannot expect athletes to engage in certain behaviors if the coaches themselves do not engage in them. Coaches must consistently model the desired communication behaviors for greatest effects. If you make a mistake communicating, you can model how you would like your athletes to handle a similar situation. You can acknowledge and admit to your mistake, and correct it in a composed manner. Remember, nonverbal communication is a critical factor in interacting with athletes. In fact, it is argued that how you deliver a message is more important than what you say (Hardy, Burke, & Crace, 2005). Eye contact, facial expressions, and hand gestures should be consistent with your personal and team values.

Feedback

Coaches constantly provide feedback to improve athlete and team performance. It is important to use the effective communication skills listed above to ensure the most effective delivery and correct interpretation of the information. Additionally, you may consider using the sandwich approach when providing feedback. Provide a positive message to the athlete followed by an instruction, and end with an encouraging comment. For example, "John, good effort closing down space. Be sure to pressure the player to one side. If you practice that, you will be more successful containing the attacker."

Use more "ands" than "buts" to ensure that the entire message is heard. Often, people only remember what is said after "but." For example, "Anna, nice job closing down space, but you need to improve your approach." Anna is likely to only take in the information that she needs to work on her approach rather than also hearing the compliment. Try changing the "but" to "and", for example, "Anna, nice job closing down the space and you need to improve your approach." It is important for you to communicate what athletes do well as well as what they need to improve. Below, see the difference between feedback and criticism.

Feedback vs. Criticism	
Targets Task	Targets Athlete Personally
Specific	General
Based on Facts	Based on Perception/Judgment

Focuses on Change	Blames
Builds on Relationship	Breaks down Relationship

It is critical for coaches to be honest and open when providing feedback and to genuinely care for the athletes. That is, coaches who tell athletes the truth in an understanding way, are receptive to feedback, and are willing to converse with athletes are more likely to gain the trust of their team. Caring is not often thought of as part of the coach's role; however, providing a caring atmosphere, defined as respect, empathy, and acknowledgement (Hardy, Burke, & Crace, 2005), can positively impact the team dynamic.

References

Hardy, C. J., Burke, K. L., & Crace, R. K. (2005). *The Sport Psych Handbook*. S. Murphy (Ed.). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.