

Keys to Getting the Most Out of Kids: Part Two

Having a Delivery System that Works With Players

Once we accept the responsibility of being a coach, the way that we talk to others and deliver information will either help or hinder our effectiveness. To begin, it is important to think back on those who have tried to teach and coach us in the past. Learning what to do and what not to do starts with our own experiences.

Consider carefully ways that adults in charge have interacted with you in the past that were offensive or turned you completely off, so no matter what they knew you did not want to buy anything they were trying to sell! Avoiding these roadblocks to communication is goal number one in developing an effective delivery system that works with players.

Step One: Stop doing things that block communication

Words should not be our first consideration because our attitudes and feelings about others are powerfully communicated non-verbally. We let people know we think they are wrong or incompetent by body language, facial expressions and tone of voice. Getting into another person's space with a tense body, or with hands on hips, or hands thrown into the air make it clear without words that they are being judged and the verdict is negative. Rolling our eyes or jutting out the jaw or looking away with an expression of disgust let players know prior to one uttered word that they have failed you in some way. Tone of voice, when dripping with sarcasm or disapproval, takes even the most positive statement and turns its meaning around. Non-verbals are a universal language, and we simply must realize the power they have if we want to establish a positive relationship with the kids we coach. Some non-verbals, always, put kids on the defensive!

Now we can consider how words have power to interfere with a player's desire to benefit from our coaching. At times we must point out mistakes that are blocking effective performance. If a player is gripping a bat too tightly or not stepping on line when they throw or trying to catch the ball with the mitt angled in the wrong direction, these must be eliminated and replaced by a more fundamental approach. But if we point out errors publicly without a specific improvement we are not helping anything, we are just being negative and risking

embarrassment. If we point out errors sarcastically, we are encouraging others to laugh at a players mistake. All this accomplishes is fear of failing and self-consciousness. These uses of words, in the long run, are never effective! Eliminating roadblocks lets us develop more effective ways to interact.

Step Two: Develop the habits that create effective communication

Begin with our attitudes and feelings about our players. They must be developed. From the previous article about developing a foundation to coach from, “mutual respect allows us to admit our mistakes and then work on them. That is the bedrock of effective coaching!” Once we have taken the time to value our players, non-verbal cues reflect our interest and respect for each of our athletes. Our body language is not imposing ourselves on others, it supports them as we teach and work through mistakes. Our face reflects concern and hope. Our words are formed by the empathy we have developed toward individual players, knowing who needs encouragement and who might welcome a challenge. And finally, knowing that it is impossible to relate perfectly to every kid throughout an entire season, we are on the lookout for player body language that looks defeated or embarrassed. Once detected, the best move is asking how they are doing and seeing how we can help them get over a mistake or a bad day that might have begun hours or days before they arrived for a practice or a game. If we are ready to apologize if something we have done has not been helpful, we can establish a better place to work from moving forward. The “buck stops with us” to establish a positive communication system for our team! Now we must consider what we need to communicate.

Step Three: Genuine Knowledge of Fundamental Instruction and the Game of Baseball

Every time we help one of our players improve, we have created the win/win interaction that makes teaching and coaching so enjoyable. We win because we get to experience making a positive difference in others. Players win because their improvement shows them they can get better and makes them want to work harder and improve more. They start trusting us. This win/win cycle allows improvement to grow and leads to performances in games that reflect effective coaching. This cycle is only possible if we understand fundamentals well enough to be diagnostic. Good doctors understand symptoms and immediately prescribe medicine or actions we can take to feel better. Good coaches observe

a performance and immediately prescribe an adjustment that makes performance improve. This means they make corrections that are appropriate and attainable for that player, focusing on the one thing that can help them at that moment. If we offer too many corrections or too much advice, players are overwhelmed. If we offer nothing but the problem, we are equally ineffective. The key, like Goldilocks, is the “just right” single correction offered in a timely, safe manner. How do we learn the game well enough to make effective corrections?

First, learn from those who have successfully coached for years. Watch effective coaches at work and take notes of how they interact and what they teach and how they manage a game. Attend their practices and watch their drills and practice organization. Ask them out for coffee and pick their brains about how to improve what you are doing, working to integrate some of their ideas into your coaching style. Ask these veteran coaches to come watch a practice that you design, and let them offer suggestions of how you can use your time more effectively. Nothing will make you a more knowledgeable coach than this strategy; it is a shortcut to learning only from trial and error. Learn from the trial and error of those who have already learned many lessons and your growth will increase dramatically.

Second, read baseball-coaching books and watch videos of good teaching. For starters, ask experienced coaches what they consider to be helpful reads and good sites to observe teaching in action via video's and streaming opportunities. If we think that what we know is more than enough and we do not need to expand our knowledge each and every year to challenge ourselves to improve, our kids are stuck with our limited perspective. And the less we know, the greater the chance that our “diagnosis” will be wrong and our tips to improve will not help our players. Ignorance does not make win/win coaching happen very often.

Third, regularly find a baseball clinic each season. Go with some coaching friends and those you are going to coach with that year. Sit together and take the time to discuss what you are learning and how it will best fit the kids and age level you are going to have that season. When possible, pull aside a speaker that you found interesting and helpful and pick their brain with the questions you have about how you can adapt their ideas into your coaching situation. A good coach is a life long learner, always looking to expand their approaches to improve players and better problem solve how to correct the ways they will struggle with the

game physically and mentally. The goal is becoming good at diagnosing problems and offering corrections to improve as fast as possible. Win/win!

Conclusion and Reflection Questions

Once we have established the foundation of making players development our top priority, focusing on delivering a positive experience for every young person we coach; we must develop an effective way to interact and instruct our players. The success of both of these priorities hinges upon our ability to get control of our competitive self interest! The game, the team, and our players are more important than using the game to make ourselves look good to others. Once that is established, we can become highly effective with our players.

The first challenge to making this happen is eliminating the non-verbal and verbal ways that poor communicators make others defensive and start to tune out instruction. As long as those bad habits persist our effectiveness will be severely hampered. Good communication is founded upon mutual respect and trust. No short cuts work! A player must know the coach has their best interests at heart before they can accept that the only reason you are pointing out a mistake is to offer a correction to make them better. Once that is established, win/win interactions are possible. Now, improvement hinges on the coaches knowledge of fundamentals and game strategies. Work needs to be done to create the knowledge to diagnose problems accurately and make helpful corrections. This is best achieved by learning from more experienced coaches, reading and observing video's of instruction, and regularly attending clinics each year. If we are truly interested in getting the most out of our players, the way we communicate and the content of our communication must be developed.

Here are some reflection questions for your consideration. Use your coaching journal and continue personalizing this information to deepen your coaching. This is just the beginning of your journaling. Include your observations of other coaches and the insights you get from talking with them, as well as notes from clinics. I have a filing cabinet full of ideas and growth from forty-two years of working this system to improve my players and my coaching one year at a time.

What are some specific ways that teachers and coaches have worked with you in the past that were not helpful? What are specific examples from your past that were ways that good teachers and coaches worked with you effectively and truly helped you learn. You know yourself better than anyone! What are things you personally need to avoid working with athletes? What are things you really need to do with your players to be effective?

Then: Do a real inventory of your baseball knowledge. What parts of the game do you understand well enough to teach? How can you make them even stronger? What are your weak areas? Make a plan to strengthen them? Repeat this learning process every year as a part of end of season evaluation!